

Black History Month

Mentoring Panel Unanswered Questions

Panel Members:

Alphonso Thomas, Director of Engineering and Technical Management, Air Force Sustainment Center

Col. Jenise Carroll, 75th Air Base Wing Commander, Hill Air Force Base

Master Sgt. Aaron Trammell, Contracting Superintendent, Tinker AFB

1. How can you bring up hard conversations to your leadership when they are not receptive to have the discussion?
 - a. You just have to be courageous and do it. They are either going to listen or say no, and if they say no, you can document that you tried to initiate the conversation. It is best to try to appeal to that person's personality and sense of duty. Say, "I need help, and I need to sit and talk to you about it." The key is communication and understanding what it takes to get that person to listen. It will feel better to clear the air so that the hard conversation is not sitting on your chest. Having that conversation puts the onus on leadership to fix whatever issues you brought up or change their ways. Never pass up on the opportunity to circle back and clear the air. – Col Carroll
2. Many individuals have a difficult time trusting others because it appears that there are some individuals who withhold information when asked to share their wisdom. How can mentors eliminate the stigma of "information withholding"?
 - a. If someone is actually withholding the information, that stigma is necessary. There's often the feeling, "If I share that information, you won't need me." The intention may be to get people to do their own research, but it often creates distrust of leadership and can hurt an organization. If someone is not withholding information but their employees or mentees feel that information is being withheld, then that perception needs to be addressed. That mentor/supervisor needs to make an effort to share information with everyone. If that person is a supervisor, make an effort to email to the whole unit to show transparency. Everything goes back to communication. – Mr. Thomas
3. Whose responsibility is it to initiate a mentoring relationship? Is it up to the more senior individual/mentor to ask, or the potential mentee to seek out a mentor and ask?
 - a. Usually it is up to the mentee to initiate a mentoring relationship. Sometimes, as a mentor, I will see someone I want to mentor and initiate that conversation. However the mentee needs to show that they actually value the relationship and want to work for their goals. As the mentee, you have to know what you want from your mentoring relationship, be that education or career development, and find the right person to mentor you based on those goals. – MSgt Trammell

4. It is clear the three of you have significant experience as being both mentors and mentees. In terms of personal attributes, what do you like to see in a mentee?
 - a. The mentee should be willing to have a conversation. The individual should know what they want to talk about coming in and ask questions. I am always impressed when my mentee comes in with a series of questions and takes control over their career. It is on the mentee to figure out and communicate what they want out of that mentoring relationship. I want someone who has passion and goals. That's when I feel like I can do my best to help them thrive and achieve their goals. I look for a mentee who is willing to do the work to actually grow. I will give homework and ask questions about their career path. If they have not done that by our next session, that is disappointing, and the relationship may not go much further or be beneficial for the mentee. – Mr. Thomas
5. Is trust given or earned for the mentee/mentor relationship?
 - a. Like so many questions in life, the answer is: it depends. If someone trusts you, it is up to you whether or not you keep or lose that trust. If someone does not trust you, it is up to you to earn their trust. Trust is earned over time but lost in a moment. Once that trust is earned, people will run through a brick wall for you. – Mr. Thomas
6. What roadblocks, if any, did you experience in your mentoring journey?
 - a. As a mentee, I have been denied mentoring or development that put me in a state of being afraid to ask questions of my leadership and eventually giving up on them. It was not until I moved out of that office that I regained confidence that my leadership cared about me. I have definitely been denied opportunities for development and had to stay resilient and keep looking outside of my leadership. –Mr. Thomas
 - b. As a mentor, my roadblocks were my high standards. I had to be okay with someone who had lesser standards than I did. I wanted some of my mentees to shoot for the moon, but they wanted to stay in the clouds. You may want to push them, but you have to be okay with the career path they want. You need to find out what they want whether it be professional, leadership, technical, etc. from their careers. If you want it more than them, the game is over. There is nothing you can do as a mentor. – MSgt Trammell
7. How do you express your level of influence when advocating for a person? How do mentors gain influence on a professional level?
 - a. Mentors gain influence by their certification or rank and their competency in their career field. In order to gain that influence, you have to be credible. Mentors can express their level of influence when advocating for a mentee by giving them the tools they need to succeed. You can lose credibility by giving bad information or by advocating for someone who lets you down or is less committed than they say they are. Make sure you are honest about your opinion about that individual,

strengths and weaknesses, and work to sure those weaknesses up and bring out their strengths. That individual needs an equal opportunity to share their strengths. Having those hard conversations about weaknesses can inspire someone to get back on the course they want to be. – Col Carroll

8. From your own experience, what should someone who is not Black/African American know when entering into a mentoring relationship with someone who is Black/African American?
 - a. First of all, there has to be respect. That is something I should not need to earn when I walk into a room simply because of a difference in race. I should be respected as a human being, as a member of the Air Force, and as a professional. Second, there needs to be an openness to hear my story and understand my goals. – Mr. Thomas
 - b. Be careful about stereotyping and making assumptions about who I am. Also, be aware of any double standards in the way you treat people of different demographics, be it race, gender, ability, etc. In my own career, the stereotype became that I was hard on my people because I was not willing to stick to the status quo. Some people do not like change, but change is necessary for our Air Force. – Col Carroll
9. What advice do you have for someone who is entering into their first cross-cultural mentoring relationship?
 - a. Just be open minded. My views are not going to be the same as yours, but if you are open to what I am saying, then I will be open to what you are saying. – MSgt Trammell
10. What tips do you have for new mentors to be more inclusive?
 - a. It's about listening, understanding, breaking down barriers, and having a conversation. Listening is key. You should also continually challenge your own biases. As a mentor, you should look around at who you are mentoring, and if you are not being inclusive, you need to go out of your way to seek more diverse mentees. – Col Carroll
11. How and when did you begin your mentoring journey?
 - a. Mr. Thomas- My professional AF mentoring journey began as a GS-12 trying to become a GS-13 when I was being denied those opportunities. I was sitting in a science and engineering road show, and I raised my hand and said that I was not getting any mentoring. The division chief asked me to sit in his office and talk about my career. However, I started benefitting from mentoring and nurturing in the 5th grade. Our schools were segregated until I was in the 6th grade, so that environment was accepting of the class system. It's hard to feel valued when put in that kind of situation, but in 5th grade, my school teacher helped me appreciate

what I had to offer despite the stigmas or the mistreatment. She helped me see my own self-worth.

- b. Col Carroll- My journey started as a 1st Lieutenant. I was being pushed for an opportunity, but I did not want to do it. I was sat down by someone who I still keep in touch with today who talked to me about my career. That was the push that got me started on my career.
 - c. MSgt Trammell- When I had my bachelor's degree as an A1C, I started talking to various people about how I got my education while on the flight line. That helped me become a mentor to others who were interested in furthering their own education.
12. How many mentors should one person have at the same time?
- a. You should have 7 mentors: one for life, one for personal matters, your main mentor, your first mentor, a sounding board, a cheerleader for you, and any kind of new mentor that might come along. More than 7 is hard to manage. – MSgt Trammell
13. How can Airmen be connected to people who **actually** would want to consistently mentor them?
- a. You have to approach leaders with courage and connect early. Break down the barriers, and that is how you connect with all Airmen. Being very transparent will attract people to you. Reach out to people you admire and can have a conversation with. Networking is a great way to find mentors you click with organically. – Col Carroll
 - b. MyVector has a great repository of mentors if you are looking for someone of a specific rank. It can also help you find what kind of mentoring relationship you are looking for in the long run. It is also important to give feedback on these tools to continue to make them better. – Mr. Thomas
14. Would you say that there are “stages” of mentorship?
- a. There are stages of any relationship. The more you get to know each other the more comfortable you will be. The best steps to follow are: listen, learn, and lead. First, you need to listen to each other in order to learn each other's goals. Then you can start prioritizing their goals and how they can achieve those goals. The mentor can also advise if the mentee needs a new or an additional mentor. – Col Carroll
15. How do you measure the growth of someone that you're mentoring?
- a. By their actions, their roadmap, and their goals. Are they actually meeting their goals and is the relationship showing dividends? Sit the mentee down and say, “We talked about this, where are you on these goals?” Asking that question along the way will help you course correct or accelerate the mentee on their own path. – Mr. Thomas

16. What can AFMC do (with its considerable size and influence) to help entice disadvantaged children into lucrative and satisfying professions?
- a. The STEM K-12 school programs can help entice children into government STEM jobs. Also big brother and big sister programs can help children see the opportunities we offer in the Air Force. We can also learn from other services or companies who have big events with HBCUs. We need to make an effort to actively recruit and spark interest in diverse areas. Programs such as the Thurgood Marshall college program help get young, black scientists into the Air Force. The Air Force should start having job fairs and hiring events in diverse areas and schools to help spread awareness about government job opportunities. While there are AFMC initiatives underway to tackle these diversity concerns, we need to look at this enterprise wide. We need funding for these programs and better understanding for what these programs are. If we continue to only grab people from a certain type of background, we are not going to achieve our DEIA goals. We need to better understand the magnitude of what we need to do to achieve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. – Mr. Thomas
17. If your (the mentee or someone who's interested in becoming a mentee, but hasn't decided yet) current plan doesn't involve you working at another Air Force Base, is it a good idea for you to ask someone, who works at another Air Force Base, to be your mentor?
- a. Absolutely, mentors can come not only from the Air Force but from another DoD entity, another MAJCOM, installation, or from a corporate business or educational institution. The key factor is that you feel comfortable with your mentor, and you trust and respect that person. Mentors do not need to look like you, be like you or even in your same career-field. It can benefit sometimes to have someone from your own local area or installation and/or AFSC/career field, but is not necessary. When you enroll to obtain a mentor in MyVector, you can indicate any preferences you have (whether it be demographic, career AFSC, location, etc.). – Mandy Smith-Nethercott
18. If someone is interested in having someone as a mentor, what are some ways of accomplishing this?
- a. One should contact the person and have a trusted conversation with them. Explain why you would like them as your mentor, and what your expectations are from them. Explain your goals, aspirations and why you think they can assist you as a mentor. Remember, mentoring is a two-way street, the mentor can learn and gain as much as the mentee in these relationships. Trust and respect are the key factors to success in a mentoring relationship. – Mandy Smith-Nethercott