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LEADERSHIP SYSTEMS

## Dennis Deters: Jackson Leadership's 2005 Mentor of the Year

Dennis Deters is a Senior Executive who measures his success beyond the lower right hand corner of the Income Statement. Jackson Leadership Systems has chosen him as their 2005 Mentor of the Year.



Starting at The Cooperators Insurance Group as an underwriter in 1970, he has risen through Accounting, Human Resources, Systems and Corporate Services to be Senior Vice President, Members and Corporate Relations & Planning. Through those years, Dennis has acted as a Mentor to many up-and-coming leaders. Born among the wide open golden wheat fields of Saskatchewan, this defined his personality. His rangy good humor and open, friendly prairie boy manner belies a burning passion for the cooperative movement all over the world. He believes his organization has a purpose broader than simply making a profit; it must significantly impact people's lives – employees, customers,

and the community it serves.

Research has shown that Mentors are the most powerful, lowest cost way to develop leaders in organizations. At Jackson Leadership, we distinguish between Coaches and Mentors. Your Coach is your Boss and, like your parent, your Coach is responsible for your day-to-day skill development. A Mentor is at least one level above your Coach and, like a grandparent, provides a wise sounding board for you to shape your long term dreams. At Jackson Leadership, we believe strongly that leadership cannot be learned from point form lectures or articles alone. Rather, it is a personal art form, which must reflect the unique driving passions of the leader. It is in the caring, respectful dialogue with the Mentor that a protégé's fine tapestry of unique leadership styles are woven. Carefully chosen questions, followed by non-judgmental listening, are the cornerstone of powerful mentoring.

For the past 17 years, Dennis has been one of the most sought after Mentors in our Leadership Development program at The Cooperators. When you realize The Cooperators has been rated for the past 2 years as one of the 50 best places in Canada to work, you can appreciate how good Dennis must be at passing on to the next generation the best of what he has learned. Mentoring, the way it is done by Dennis, allows young leaders to stand on his shoulders to see where they are and how they want to use their talent to serve/lead others.

It was fascinating to hear from some of Dennis' past protégés about just what was the magic ingredient in their relationship with him.



### Keys to Setting up the Mentor Relationship:

- Picking a Mentor with a Broader Perspective than You: – Most protégés mentioned it was important they picked Dennis because he was different. “He had a broader global view than I had and he instilled it in me.” “He is an emotional thinker. With this different perspective he broadened my thinking. He was always asking ‘Did you think of that?’” “I chose Dennis because he comes at things differently than I do.”
- The Importance of Chemistry: – Picking a Mentor you feel comfortable with was mentioned by several protégés. “I wanted someone who would care enough about me to tell the truth – to push back at my assumptions.” Being able to use someone you can trust is a big thing. “I certainly trusted him always” “I could warm up to him easily. He’s the kind of person you can have lunch with for 2 hours and enjoy every minute.”
- When & Where To Meet: – Dennis only gets together with protégés 2 or 3 times a year for lunch. But he usually follows up these sessions with a note outlining what they agreed the protégé would do in the coming months. He often sent along articles relevant to what the protégé was working on.

### How he Mentors:

- Listen: - “Dennis does more listening than talking.”
- Respect confidences: - That is why people trust him.
- Big Picture Wisdom: - As George Hardy, a Senior VP of Finance, put it: “He kicks me back into the right direction when it comes to big issues by asking basic questions. He sees the company from more than the financial perspective.”
- Challenge Protégé to Change: – Jim Dale, weeks from retiring as the longest-serving executive at the Cooperators has said, “Dennis focused on soft spots. What was I going to do about them? We would deal with my workaholicism every time we got together. He’d send me articles with a note appended saying ‘Get a Life.’”
- Encourage: – As Bernie Mitchell, VP Human Resources, explained; “He is very appreciative of his people and always gives compliments. He looks for opportunities for people he mentors. I always walked out of a mentoring session with Dennis feeling more confident.”
- Push Protégé to Stretch: – Janice Reiner, Senior VP of Reinsurance recalled “He challenged me to get out and make presentations when I wasn’t comfortable doing that. Dennis encouraged me to introduce the business simulation to the Cooperators. I have run it 3 years and it is a growing success. I’ve been thrilled to do it.”
- Feedback: – “He is someone who cared enough about me to tell me the truth. He pushed back at my assumptions.” “I ask for his negative and positive perspectives about me. He has his ear to the ground. He always communicated that back to me anonymously.”



The Foundations of Effective Mentoring:

Through the descriptions of how Dennis mentors, two principles emerged which form a foundation upon which he builds:

- 1) Helping young Executives shift from Task Competence to being a Leader of People. I heard story after story of evolving from being a technical expert to managing large numbers of people.
- 2) Dennis is a modern Socrates. He doesn't advise. He doesn't judge. He doesn't sympathize. He asks the strategic questions which make you look in the mirror and realize what you are doing. Sometimes you like what you see. Sometimes you are appalled and realize you must change. He doesn't tell, he asks. Then, you realize what you must do.

The key to Dennis' effectiveness as a Mentor is similar to what has made him a successful leader. He is different. I've sat through a lifetime of senior executive meetings hearing them intone that the only important measure of their success is the size of their profits. I can best explain what makes Dennis different and what makes him the "Jackson Leadership 2005 Mentor of the Year" by reproducing a quotation he has tacked on the bulletin board behind his desk.

This is the one true joy in life. The being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. This being a force of nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community. And as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake.

Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment. And I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before I hand it on to future generations.

*George Bernard Shaw*

Congratulations, Dennis.

Dave Jackson  
Founder & CEO  
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