

MENTORSHIP ON BLUE WATER FOUNDATION SAILS: THE BASICS

Introduction:

Certain sailing programs utilized by Blue Water extend beyond the simple field trip that constitute the bulk of our sails with the San Francisco School District. Those programs usually involve the students returning for multiple sessions to learn aspects of sailing and nature over a three or four month period. Alternatively, some programs have the students returning for multiple days over a week or three.

Unlike a field trip, where the student may work the boat or steer the vessel for a short period of time, the extended programs have the students working the boat on a continuing basis and the method utilized by Blue Water to teach is the **mentor system**.

The mentor system assigns one or two volunteers to teach the same student over the period of the course and to work with that student mastering the skills needed for basic sailing.

But the most important aspect of mentoring is establishing a lasting relationship with the student, becoming a team that can work the boat and learn the skills and, usually, also sharing thoughts on past experiences, hopes, dreams, plans and issues confronted. It is the establishment of that relationship that is the key. *Sailing is the tool. Connection is the goal.*

Many of our incarcerated students have an extremely limited experience outside of the small neighborhood they come from. In gang areas, it is dangerous to leave the six to ten block area controlled by your gang. Some students from the East Bay have never been over the Bay Bridge.

For those students to work with our volunteers from all walks of life and often from other countries abroad is a remarkable event for them. They are drawn to it. They can learn about alternative lifestyles and opportunities and what types of jobs and training may be available once out of probation. Blue Water has scholarships that may assist.

One important aspect is that the mentor returns to teach more than once. Most of the students do not have regular families and far fewer have a father living at home. They are used to being abandoned by adults. To demonstrate that you care enough to return and continue the teaching matters a great deal to them. A typical question they ask upon arriving at the boat is whether the mentor is here today. When they hear we are not paid to be with them, it surprises them. As one student commented, "No one wants to be with me that isn't paid. Except family."

We are all volunteers and have other commitments. For a six or ten session series of classes, we often cannot attend all of them. The solution is to explain that to the student and have two or more mentors assigned to the student. We ask the mentors to commit to at least three of the sails scheduled.

Failure to assign a mentor for these classes can often result in the sailing trip becoming a defacto field trip. That is not "bad," but does lose a key aspect of the program. It is up to the captain and the mentor assigned to make sure tasks are undertaken and mastered as much as possible. The students are proud of what they learn and at the graduation at the end of the class proudly demonstrate new skills to family and friends.

This article shall discuss the basics of our mentoring system for these repeat students.

BASIC MENTORING SYSTEM: STEPS AND GENERAL APPROACH; ROLE OF FIRST CAPTAIN

1. The **first captain** normally assigns mentors to students at the start of every sail immediately after the safety talk. The Probation Officers can assist in this assignment, and it is useful to ask the students if they see a past mentor present and assign them again to each other.
2. Once assigned, five minutes is allowed for the mentors and mentees to meet and get to know each other.
3. The captain then assigns the team of mentor (s) and mentee to specific tasks. Examples are one team casts off the bow lines, another team prepares to raise the main, etc. etc. *They continue to act as a team throughout the sail as assigned by the first captain.* There can be multiple mentors for each mentee. The **captain** rotates the teams to learn the various aspects of sailing on the agenda for that class.
4. It is up to the **captain** to ensure that there is rotation of tasks as the sail progresses and that the boat is put through its paces. Tacking, gybing, reefing, etc. should be repeatedly practiced with teams rotated...this is independent of the actual compass course set. We are teaching and must drill this.
5. Time should be allowed and mentors encouraged to simply sit and talk with the student. While personal details as to where one lives or works should not be given, nor questions about why incarcerated posed, general discussions of what one does for a living, where one has traveled, what the student hopes to do with his/her life, what interests them, etc. are encouraged. You work as a team but also get to know each other.
6. The basic rule for mentorship was created by our President Cory fifteen years ago. "If you are doing it the student is not. Show them once, then keep your hands off." She also said, "the person with their hands on the task is the one learning. Give your mentee an example/information and then support them in doing the task. Get to know what works for your mentee."
7. Criticism should be muted...instead of saying you are doing this wrong, say "try it this way...this way works better."
8. The mentor should do very little other than show once and guide after that. This can be difficult for our racer volunteers who want efficiency and perfection in sailing. This is a lesson, not a race and when asked to do something, whether it is cast off lines, reef or dropping the sails, the mentor must have the student do it as a team. Always.
9. Depth of teaching must be adjusted to the student. We are not a sailing school and many students just want to experience the water and learn the basics. Some students are far more interested and want to become excellent sailors. Learn how much they want to learn. Sailing terms should not be made a priority unless they want to learn the large vocabulary. Teach them the terms they need and spare them the precise definition of the linguistic basis of halyard... unless they ask.

10. Crew and captains must understand that every task will take longer and relax: we are teaching and teaching requires time.
11. If an emergency occurs, mentorship stops and the crew handles the emergency as the captain directs. An emergency, however, is not simply something that should be done quickly...it is a dangerous situation.
12. Confidence in the student is vital. They fully remember each accomplishment they achieve. We have little idea of the effect that praise and success can have on them. Most have never graduated from any school or program; few ever get praise at home or their neighborhood. They may be athletes but are kicked off of teams due to behavior. This is their chance to show what they can do.
 - a. One probation class achieved a live overboard recovery in three minutes and fifteen seconds...a Blue Water record...and relived that triumph for months. They referred to that success on every sail thereafter.
13. If the mentor does not let them perform, it shows lack of trust and respect and they will know that. Your goal is to have them achieve skills and be proud of it. It does not hurt to say you are proud of them. In their world, they seldom get praise.
14. Be patient. Most students have never been on a sailboat before, and it is as strange to them as you walking on the moon would be to you. In high winds, reefing, water spraying, be sure to make sure the student feels you are there to help and protect. If it is too much for him or her, tell the captain *in private* and the captain should reassign who is doing what. But if it is only nervousness and not real fear, give them the added time to finish the task...and praise them for their perseverance.
15. They love sea stories; they love to hear as to races or sailing to distant places or where you learned to sail. They love to hear how to handle emergencies and how you will depend on them. They want to feel part of the crew.
16. Do not take pictures without their permission. Most do not want their time on probation publicized or memorialized. Laws exist that prohibit pictures of incarcerated students. Do not include them in pictures absent their permission and permission of the PO.
17. Listen to them. Really listen.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES ENCOUNTERED:

1. One does not know what has happened that day or that week with the student. If you can, visit their facility to get a better idea. They can arrive upset or saddened by some encounter at the facility. They are not in control of their own lives for much of the time. A family member may have been injured or shot. A court appearance may have gone badly. We do not know.
 - a. It is important to try to see if they are bothered. If one has mentored them before, the difference can be noted. If not, the probation officer may be able to give some guidance.

- b. If they are sullen or clearly do not want to learn, it does little good to push. We are not trained in confrontation with these students, and the issue should be presented to the PO.
 - c. It is often worthwhile to simply let the student calm down. Point out sights that can be seen, invite them to help with some sailing tasks, make sure the captain is aware that there is an issue with that student. It may be that just letting the student “chill” for the sail makes sense. A common comment made by the students during the round up after the sail is that the sail calms them, the sights make them relax. That may be all that matters that day. Be aware of this.
 - d. Laziness is another matter. Some students want to just doze or sleep...their prior night may have been without sleep. Again, talk to the PO...but it is perfectly fine to tell the student that YOU need their help, you are a team, and you need him to do X or Y. If he/she continues to resist, let the captain know as well as the PO.
 - e. Any significant tension between students should be reported to the PO.
 - f. Some mentors and mentees simply do not get along. That should not be surprising. Do you like everyone you meet? If that continues for more than one or two exchanges, let the captain know and we may switch mentees.
 - g. It is up to the captain to be alert as to problems and issues. Most of the time the captain does not have his or her own mentee and that is both to allow him or her to concentrate on the boat as a whole AND to allow him or her to make sure the mentorship is working.
2. Inappropriate language or behavior is unacceptable. Report it to the captain and PO. The captain should ask the PO what the appropriate remedy is. The PO normally assigns students based on their attitude and if that student is not right for the course, the PO will adjust.
 3. Often the students do not return to the next class. This can be due to events at the facility, family issues, court issues, etc. Ask the PO if they can be expected back and if not, new assignments should be sought.
 4. Learning together is an excellent way to bond. One of our best mentors was not a remarkably experienced sailor and she would ask the student if he would help her figure out how to do a particular task. He loved it and they worked it out.
 5. Share experiences with other mentors. We are all learning this as we go. And we have several volunteers who are teachers, social workers, counselors, etc. and their expertise is available if you ask, especially during the Blue Water roundup after the sail.
 6. At graduation it is a good idea, if their family and friends are there, to meet them and tell them how much you enjoyed working with them.
 7. Be sure to let them know they are welcome back to volunteer once they are out of probation and that they would be excellent volunteers.
 8. Give them space as well. One thing it took us years to learn was that on the way back to the dock the students like to sit and stare at the water and chat among themselves. Give them that space if they want it.

9. Certain things they particularly love:

- a. Teach them knots
- b. Get them on the wheel and let them feel the boat
- c. Show them the electronics, especially the radar during the day and night vision during the night sails.
- d. Overboard drills.

Conclusion:

The connection with a mentee can be life changing for you as well. Not always in a good way. One mentee was charming, intelligent, outgoing, claimed he had his whole life planned...and was actually guilty of murdering another gang member and was shot himself six months later. All of the crew that knew him were shocked and dismayed.

But to counter that, several of our mentees had discovered the path out of their lifestyle, several receiving scholarships from Blue Water that helped them on that path.

All the successful ones stated that one person...a teacher, often...made the difference. They realized they had potential; they had the ability to change their lives. You can be part of that process...and you will never forget that.