

VITAL CONNECTIONS

Mentoring Snapshot Comes Into Focus

By Rebecca Patrick



The Innovation Connector is a full-service business resource incubator focused on emerging tech and innovative companies in East Central Indiana. In January 2017, the group launched the Coding Connector for area students to promote discovery of coding and programming.

“Our chief want in life is somebody who will make us do what we can.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

That wisdom from the famed poet perfectly reflects the impact that a good mentoring relationship can have on a person’s life.

As Indiana continues to take steps to further establish its identity in the technology and innovation space, mentoring for those entrepreneurs and future leaders is paramount.

Making it a priority

Incubators and co-working spaces may be more prominent in number in the Indianapolis metro area, but they also have become commonplace across the state.

The Innovation Connector in Muncie has enjoyed growing success for the last 15 years. It currently has 44 office spaces – all of them full. The facility attracts people from Jay County to the east, New Castle to the south and points north.

Without a doubt, says executive director and CEO Ted Baker, mentoring can be the determining factor in success. So much so that it’s his primary job – to be a business coach and advisor.

“Some people are in my office every day. It’s like when one of your kids needs something and you just drop things,” he notes. “Some of them know a little bit; some of them know nothing. We’ll mentor them on what they need to know. We don’t enable our clients, we empower them.”

He has also brought some resources into the facility. Those include the Indiana Small Business Development Center and SCORE, which is an organization that provides free business mentoring services

to entrepreneurs.

Baker adds: “On top of that, we have relationships with other business owners – start-ups who have made it and people in certain industries. We make it intentional to find out what kind of resources that client needs. That’s the most important thing that we can do.

“What is sometimes the hardest for us and for any mentor is to get the business start-up owner or the one who’s in the early stage to understand that there are best practices of ways to do things – and not that it’s the only way, but they need to listen to others for help. That’s the most frustrating thing ...when they think they know everything,” he acknowledges.

Shelley Klingerman, executive director of Launch Terre Haute, which has been in full operation a little over a year, puts it another way.

“Mentoring saves them from lots of mistakes, costly and timely mistakes, because mentors can help you navigate those challenges. Networking – making those connections; it’s so much better to have a warm handoff than do a cold call.”

Opportunities and challenges

When asked if he was fairly content with the mentoring provided at the Innovation Connector, Baker was blunt.

“I don’t know what that word – content – means. Muncie is a bigger city, but (what’s going on here) is not like anything we’re seeing in the Indianapolis metro area, and even Lafayette, Fort Wayne and Evansville. There’s some amazing things happening in those places.”

Still, Baker believes his home base has a significant amount of knowledge and resources for mentoring; it’s more about getting people on the same page and properly sharing and exchanging knowledge in the most beneficial way.

“The problem is that there are too many individual silos where people and groups act independently on their own. I think this is in each community – but we’re seeing this being broken down now in Muncie.”

Baker also contends that proximity shouldn't really come into the equation as long as you have access to a phone or computer.

A business coach and friend of Baker's, who lives in Texas, has his own coach in Seattle. "He's never seen her before. He's just on the phone and on the internet. She has changed the way he thinks ... rather, she's allowing him to change the way he thinks. Sometimes it's good to have that space."

Both Baker and Klingerman stress you don't need to be in the same industry – in this case, the tech world – to gain insight from a mentor.

Unlike most co-working spaces, Launch Terre Haute is taking on non-tech clients. Klingerman says that mix only adds to the mentoring experience.

"We have freelancers who work out of there, we have individuals from larger companies who use this space as an office. Their networks aren't necessarily even here (in Terre Haute), so it sort of catapults others into areas they would have had no connection to.

"So they become really good resources for especially our younger entrepreneurs."

Baker asserts: "I do believe that we're in a time where if we only get our resources from one location or one entity or one part of the ecosystem, you're not going to make it.

"But I (also) think if you're in the tech world, you'd better start hanging around people who understand tech. If you don't, you're not going to make it. However, if that's all you hang around, it's going to be hard for you then too. There needs to be a good balance."

Meanwhile, Baker says he's hearing less and less about challenges in mentoring, even in more rural locales.

"What we're seeing is that there's help out there. The question is: Are you taking advantage of that help? We can teach them to do business around the world, but if they're going to do business in say Hagerstown or Knightstown, then they have to learn about doing business within their community.

"I always ask people, 'Who do you know in your community that has inspired you?' We want them to hang around those people," he continues.

"Here's the other thing: It's not (only) about us supplying them with all of their mentors. Some of this is on them. They've got to figure out who they need it from and go get it."

RESOURCES: Ted Baker, Innovation Connector, at www.innovationconnector.com | Shelley Klingerman, Launch Terre Haute, at www.launchterrehaute.com

Business Point of View



"My business partners and I have been incredibly blessed in the South Bend region with mentors who have been incredibly successful businesspeople and massively impacted the South Bend region and want to continue to see the growth," offers Rich Carlton, president and COO of Data Realty and Aunalytics.

"These individuals are not only mentors with their advice, but many have been mentors as investors.

Carlton is pleased with the increased shared purpose that exists: "We're becoming much more regional between South Bend and Elkhart, Goshen, Mishawaka and Plymouth and our greater marketplace here.

"We host a tableau user group, we host a technology networking group to get people to continue to talk about tech and that's very cross-county with our whole north central region."

Internally, Carlton prioritizes the importance of letting employees know the company is making investments in them. One of those ways is with purposeful mentoring.

"We have a focused effort for people at various levels to meet with other people in organizations, cross-functionally, as well as within their own function," he explains.

"It's about mentoring in the technology space, so you've got places you can go to learn more about a specific software or code or a technology. And there's people here in the organization too – a lot of them have done teaching in the past."

RESOURCE: Rich Carlton at www.data-realty.com and www.aunalytics.com