Building a Path to the Future: Mentoring New SREs

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Why Talk About Mentorship?

Why do we need to be better mentors?

- There aren't many formal programs for teaching SRE work
- The hiring pipeline – and the workload – is extremely top-heavy
- Remote work is increasingly common, and learning by osmosis is harder
- Mentorship is a force-multiplier

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What does it take to be a good mentor?

- Time
- Empathy
- Patience
- Organizational Support

Guiding Lights

Be Welcoming

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Be Vulnerable

Be Explicit

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Be Available

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Methods

Documentation

- Gives mentees something to use as a foundation – or a reference
- Be sure to explain not just how to do things, but *why* you do things
- Including context helps them apply knowledge to undocumented situations
- Doesn't even have to be your documentation – have a list of good references

Photo Credit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/thisisdisplay/6112626495/

Office Hours

- Sit on an open call – whether people stop by or not
- Provides a time when your mentees know you are available for questions
- Helps protect your time outside this slot

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Pairing and "Riding Shotgun"

- One of the best – but most time consuming methods
- Let mentees drive while you help navigate
- Try "riding shotgun" if they need support, but not necessarily pairing

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Talking to Yourself

- Use Slack threads in open channels to talk through your problems
- New engineers can see that you don't know everything – so it's okay if they don't either
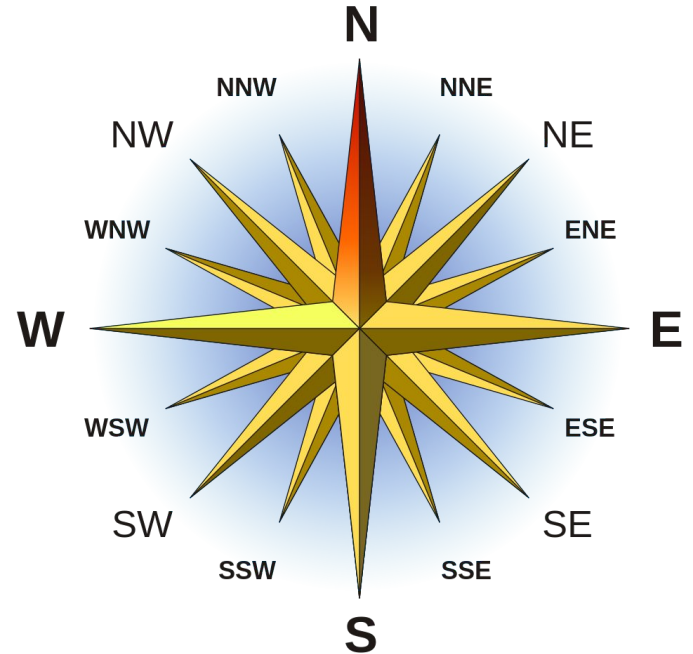- Helps make your thought processes explicit, and prompts discussion that can also illuminate thorny issues

Chas (US/Chicago, she/her) 9:39 AM
(Excuse me while I talk to myself and feel free to weigh in or ignore my rambling)

Orienteering

- Help them understand where they are in their career
- Help them find which direction they really want to go
- Show them landmarks of their progress, and make sure others can recognize it too

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Issues

Unknown Unknowns

The Problem With Abstractions

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Image Credit:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sphcow.jpg

The Bubble

Image Credit:
https://www.maxpixel.net/Face-Man-Hand-Bubble-
Fantasy-Horror-Ball-5638866

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A Note on Sponsorship

Wrapping Up

To be a good mentor:

- Be Welcoming
- Be Vulnerable
- Be Explicit
- Be Available

References

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- "How to Be a Sponsor When You're a Developer", Lara Hogan, LeadDev, October 2020

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