

Second Century

Mentoring Matters



“Mentoring the Next Generation” of Amateur Radio operators will be the shared theme of two events occurring this month, as Hamvention, the largest annual Amateur Radio gathering in the US, hosts the 2019 ARRL National Convention on May 17 – 19.

When we think of mentoring, we generally think of passing along one’s personal experiences in a one-on-one setting. I assert that mentoring is, and should be, much more than this. We know that people learn best from a combination of traditional academic or independent self-paced courses, coupled with personal interaction. If ham radio is to grow, we need every ham to be a mentor to, let’s say, at least two new hams. How will you mentor the next generation?

A long time ago, as a junior officer in the US Air Force, I learned about the four important parts of effective communications: the speaker, the listener, the medium, and the message. The speaker needs to tailor the content of the message into the language the listener understands, and deliver the message in a way, or medium, that the listener can absorb. Effective communications is two-way. The speaker needs to be listening for feedback on how the message is being received.

Later, as a professor, I learned about the importance of learning styles. One educational theory describes three styles of learners: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Another theory describes seven learning styles. Even without going into detail about the characteristics of these various learning styles, their message is clear: to effectively convey information, the speaker needs to understand the listener.

So who is ham radio’s average likely mentor? We can’t say for sure, but the average ARRL member is a 68-year-old white male. In my February 2019 column, “The Spectrum of Hams,” I described how hams could be viewed on a two-dimensional grid — communications to technology, hobby to service. I described groupings of hams — guardians, technologists, and “the ready” (who enjoy public service). I assert that your own view of Amateur Radio is influenced by where you are on that grid, and your path through that grid.

Fifty-four percent of our current members have an Amateur Extra-class license, 31% have a General-class license, and 15% have a Technician-class license. But the pool of non-member amateurs is very different. They, too, are generally white males, but younger. In a category we call “rookies,” the average age is 52. In terms of license class, 75% are Technicians, while 7% are Amateur Extra, and 18% have a General-class license. And if we consider young adults and children, they are nothing like our current members.

If you’re a longtime, experienced ham, you can’t expect “rookies,” young adults, and kids to respond to mentoring the same way you responded 40, 50, 60 — or even more — years ago.

To put this into ham radio terms, you are the transmitter, and the mentee is the receiver. If you approach mentoring the way you were mentored all those years ago, you’ll have a frequency mismatch with your mentee. You’ll be transmitting on 80 meters, while they’re listening on 2 meters.

To give you some ideas about how you might approach this challenge, here are some things ARRL is undertaking in an attempt to get on the same frequency with these younger hams.

“So Now What?” podcast — bi-weekly information and advice for those just starting their journey into Amateur Radio. In addition to the podcast, we have also set up an email address and question submission form that many new hams are already taking advantage of, in order to get their specific questions answered.

“What is Ham Radio” video — the Lifelong Learning, Communications, and Production/Editorial Departments have been writing and producing a new video that explains the varied elements of this hobby/avocation to non-hams.

Maxim Learning Lab — Lifelong Learning, Communications, and the ARRL Lab are in the planning and development process for a series of videos that will cover a wide range of topics for a wide range of the Amateur Radio demographic.

And, of course, we are developing learning tracks — four of them, with four lessons in each — in the *Lifelong Learning Initiative* project being undertaken by Mintz + Hoke and a team at ARRL.

I challenge you to start a conversation with a rookie ham or non-ham teenager, and help them discover their path through the two-dimensional communications-to-technology, hobby-to-service grid. As always, I invite your comments to me at wb2itx@arrl.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Howard E Michel WB2ITX". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.