



Keys to Finding (& Making the Most of) a Mentor

Mentors can yield transformative rewards for your organization – and your self.

By Lei Wang

You’ve probably heard many stories of how people credit their success to their mentors. Working with a mentor can truly pave the way to success, but creating – and maintaining – the mentor-mentee relationship can be challenging.

Maybe your organization doesn’t offer a formal mentorship program, or maybe you don’t feel you’re receiving much value from your current mentor. Here are the keys to finding a good mentor and crafting a successful relationship:

Discover Your Mentors: Not Every Mentor Is Obvious

A mentor is someone who watches out for you and gives you advice. The relationship between a mentor and mentee is more relaxed and informal than the “forced” relationship between boss and subordinate or the contract relationship between teacher and student.

They don’t wear hats titled “mentor,” and they may not be older than you or senior in professional ranking. You may not even realize someone is playing a mentor role until much later.

There’s a tendency to determine the value of advice based on who it comes from. You’re likely to give guidance more weight when it’s from someone you regard as your superior. But the most insightful advice may come from someone among your peers, an outsider, or even someone you considered less knowledgeable than you. You may find the best perspectives come from your subordinates and members of younger generations. Indeed, asking younger people to mentor you is an invaluable way to gain new views and strengthen your organization.

Don’t dismiss advice from someone about whom you thought, “What does he know about this?” Keep an open mind and a humble attitude; your best mentors could be anywhere.

“The most innovative idea may come from a novice.”

“Consider asking younger people to mentor you.”

Asking for Help Is a Sign of Strength

Now that you know how to discover your mentors, you need to learn when to seek their help. With an abundance of information online and in books, you can often find answers on your own. There's tremendous value in self-teaching, learning through practice, and learning through mistakes.

But it's important to know when to seek help. Ask for insights with big and small problems. The more you ask, the stronger will be your relationship with your mentor, and the more likely you'll be to receive the guidance needed to move forward, reach your goals, and become a better leader.

Getting the right help at a certain point could save years of detours and missed opportunities. Gain momentum early so you're at the right place at the right time.

Get the Best Results from Mentoring

Since mentors aren't "obligated" to you, you have to work hard to keep their attention and to deserve their time and effort. The reward for the mentor isn't money or promotions but seeing your progress.

To get the most from your mentoring relationship, you need to know how to listen to advice. As in any communication, effective listening requires you to give up any prejudgment of what you hear.

The most damaging prejudgment isn't about deciding if the advice is right or wrong, or whether or not to take the advice, but telling yourself, "I know this already." When you believe you know something already, you won't listen mindfully, and you'll likely brush aside the guidance and take no action.

Often, when great advice motivates you to take the right action and it yields the right result, it isn't because it's new advice; you may have heard it many times before. That advice works only when it clicks with you, when you really listen, and when you're capable of understanding the advice. When that happens, you're likely to think, "Why didn't I take action earlier?"

Listen to every piece of familiar advice as if it's completely new. Instead of thinking "I know," ask yourself, "Have I mastered it? Have I seen good results?" If the answer is no, make a plan and take action.

A good mentor knows what you need, even what you don't. The self-knowledge you receive may be the most vital advantage to having a mentor. Outsiders and objective observers can bring powerful new viewpoints that you can't find anywhere else.

Become Your Own Mentor

Shortening your learning path is normally the reason to seek out a mentor in the first place. The most important role a mentor plays is in motivating you to reach higher goals – goals you might have thought impossible when you first sought help from your mentor.

It's also important not to rely on your mentor as a crutch forever. The goal of seeking a mentor is to become competent faster. You can't go far if you have to rely solely on external motivation. Ultimately, you have to be your own motivator.



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