



The Many Benefits of Mentorship

By

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What Is Mentorship?

Mentorship is a helping relationship between two people, a mentor and mentee. Mentorship involves advising, coaching, and counseling, usually on an informal basis.

We think of mentorship occurring exclusively in business organizations, but mentorship can happen anywhere. For example, there are numerous mentors in a family, such as parents, older siblings, aunts, uncles and so on. In an educational setting, a mentor can be that special teacher in high school who takes an interest in a student and encourages their talents. In the military, a sergeant or officer can help the new recruit navigate military life.

The reality is that mentorship is not limited to the workplace; it's pervasive in all facets of life. There are mentors in church groups, neighbors, friends, and even in social activities or book clubs.

A mentor need not be a work colleague. A mentor may work at a different company within the same industry or profession. If the mentor works for a competitor, and your supervisor approves, that's fine.

How far can you go with a mentor? Here's a poignant example from the political sphere. In 2004, Barack Obama was elected as the junior Democratic United States senator from Illinois. Senator Dick Durban, the senior Democratic senator from Illinois, sensed that Senator Obama possessed a special political talent and became Senator Obama's mentor.

As Senator Obama grew as a national political figure, Senator Durban encouraged him to run for president. Running for president is a huge decision and, for a relatively inexperienced politician such as Obama, the mentorship of a senior senator such as Durban was an important factor in the candidacy and the ultimate election of Barack Obama as president of the United States.

Benefits of Mentorships

A major benefit of mentorship is career advancement. An experienced mentor can coach the mentee on what they need to learn in order to advance in their field. In a similar vein, a mentor will know where the best opportunities are when it is time for the mentee to consider a career move. Conversely, a mentor can tell the mentee what organizations to avoid because of a toxic culture or financial instability. Although it's possible to get some of this guidance from online sources such as LinkedIn and Glassdoor, the mentor can provide more insight and make more meaningful connections.

We found that it is always beneficial to have smart friends and relatives as “sounding boards” when working through complex situations or decisions. For example, how do you deal with a toxic coworker at an otherwise perfect job? When do you know it's time to move on to a more prestigious position? What do you need to do to get noticed by those who might want to hire you? While these ad hoc requests for advice are not necessarily what we think of when we consider formal ongoing mentorships, they are valuable. Plus, sometimes the best way to cultivate a relationship with a mentor is to start off with these types of contacts from time to time.

How to Seek Out a Mentor

Mentorships do not always start out explicitly as a mentorship. Rather, the starting point of a mentorship is simply reaching out to someone with a simple request, such as, “Can you help me?” or “I would like your advice on a matter,” or “I have a few questions for you about a topic that's in your area of expertise.”

The idea is to find someone who is experienced and knowledgeable. Then reach out and politely ask for help. However, don't be a pest. Start out slowly, because you don't want to overburden your potential mentor. We found that just about anyone can spare 15 minutes to help you. If that is too much of a burden for a prospective mentor, forget that person and find someone else.

Here are a few questions to ask when considering a potential mentor:

- Are you comfortable with your potential mentor and is he/she comfortable with you?
- Does your mentor have time for you?
- Is the advice you receive solid and reliable?
- Do you sense enthusiasm on the part of the mentor?

Our experience is that mentorships don't typically start out by a person asking, “Will you be my mentor?” That question might scare some people away. Rather, the relationship should develop organically. If the relationship is solid, it will grow.

The typical mentor/mentee relationship is between someone with more experience/power/connections/etc. serving as the mentor and the less experienced person as the mentee. The mentor may have more demands on his/her time than the mentee and, as a result, be judicious as far as what else he or she takes on. The candidate a mentee might have in mind to be a mentor may also have preconceived ideas about what it takes to be a mentor. That person might believe that it would take a lot of time, be an inconvenience, and so on.

The reality is that even very busy people will make time for things that they believe are important. They also might be at a point in their careers where they are ready to “give back” and help someone else. The actor Jack Lemmon famously said to the actors that he mentored to

“always send the elevator back down,” meaning that once they achieve success, it’s their turn to help out other up-and-coming talent.

For example, years ago co-author Jack McHugh received an email from a freelance editor soliciting work. Jack replied that he didn’t have any work at that time but indicated he would keep that person in mind for future editing work. A few months later the editor solicited Jack’s advice on another matter. Later, the editor was a strong candidate for her dream job. Jack coached her on how to best interview for the position. The editor got the job. She is now into her sixth year and successful in that position. Jack and his mentee now talk approximately every two months not only about career planning but a variety of other topics as well.

Organic Mentorships

We call this type of development “organic” and it usually results in the most successful mentoring relationship. As illustrated above, mentorships rarely start out because of a specific request, but develop naturally because the conditions are right.

To get the attention of your ideal mentor, you will want to have reached out to him or her a few times, as Jack indicated. It should go without saying, but always be courteous in your outreach. Start with a simple question that’s directly in their area of expertise. Thank them for their response. Eventually, once this person has gotten to know you a little better, you can ask for some time on the phone to discuss something at greater length. Always be respectful of your potential mentor’s time. You may want to start out by suggesting setting aside 30 minutes for a call about a particular subject. The timing of this progression is up to the individuals involved. In some cases, it may happen quickly and naturally. In others, there may be lags in responses. Eventually, after several conversations, you might want to insert the term “mentorship” in your conversation, such as “I’ve really appreciated your mentorship as you’ve helped guide me through <<topic>>.” Thank you and I hope we can continue to connect from time to time.”

It’s in most people’s human nature to want to help others. Most people are incredibly busy and may want to help but don’t feel that they have the time to do so. Creating that personal connection prior to asking for help can make all the difference in setting the stage for a successful relationship with your mentor.

Mentors Can Be Older or Younger

Thus far we’ve discussed the traditional mentor/mentee relationship, in which the mentor is someone older and with more experience who is helping the mentee who is earlier in their career and looking for professional development. There is also a trend toward reverse mentoring, where the mentor is a younger person who is mentoring someone older.

Reverse mentorships are an excellent way for a more experienced individual to gain insights into new technologies, trends important to the emerging workforce, and simply to pick up additional skills. If you work for an organization that is worried about attracting and retaining the next generation workforce, reverse mentoring is an great way to find out what this new wave of employees would like from their employers. In some cases, making small changes to benefits might be the difference between a promising young employee staying with your organization or jumping ship to another one. Having a reverse mentoring relationship can create the necessary flow for this kind of communication that you wouldn’t have otherwise.

One of the many benefits of reverse mentorships is that the mentors – in this case, younger people – will also learn from their mentees. It’s a way to bridge the generation gaps in your

organization and can lead to happier, more fulfilled employees regardless of where they are in the org chart.

In the second paper on mentorship entitled, “Beyond the Basics: The Many Facets of Mentorship,” we will cover these topics:

- Bosses as Mentors
- What Qualities Should a Mentor Possess?
- Why Be a Mentor?
- Building Your “Kitchen Cabinet”
- A Word for Employers on Mentorship
- Final Thoughts on Mentorship.

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