



## **Beyond the Basics: The Many Facets of Mentorship**

**By**

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This is our second paper of two on mentorship. The first paper covered these topics: What Is Mentorship?; The Many Benefits of Membership; How to Seek Out a Mentor; Organic Memberships; and Mentors Can Be Older or Younger

### **Bosses as Mentors**

The boss/subordinate relationship is the most fundamental mentorship in any work organization. We have always believed that it is the boss’s obligation to help the person they hired succeed by mentoring the new hire. The boss/mentor should show the newcomer how to navigate the organization, thereby helping his/her career. All successful hires reflect positively on the person who hired them.

The boss’s mentorship should include coaching on the job itself, observations on relationships with colleagues, and feedback on performance. The subordinate has an obligation to reach out to his/her boss for mentorship. The new employee should ask specific questions about the job and not waste the boss’s time with discussions that aren’t pertinent to the position.

We have observed in some companies that newcomers fail as their bosses don’t mentor their new hires. We scratch our heads and ask, “Why would you ignore mentoring the person you

hired?” After all, they have proven themselves worthy of the position in your organization and you have committed to an investment in them, via their salary and benefits. Why wouldn't you want them to be successful?

Some bosses just don't realize that it is their job to help their new hires succeed. Such bosses might be lazy or just don't understand what their role is with the newcomer. Others may be insecure themselves and easily threatened by a new hire who looks like they will outshine them. A boss should always mentor people they hire and help them succeed in their careers and in the organization. In most organizations, when employees succeed, their success reflects well on the boss and the boss's boss who will appreciate good talent development skills.

### **What Qualities Should a Mentor Possess?**

Whereas this list is by no means exhaustive, we think that these four qualities are important for a mentor to possess: *approachability*, *empathy*, *listening ability*, and *generosity*.

*Approachability* is at the top of the list because a mentor should be easy to talk to and “not full of himself/herself.” Personally, we have avoided self-important people as prospective mentors. They may be too inwardly focused to truly consider another person's needs.

Second, we believe that *empathy* is an important quality. The mentor should discern what the mentee is feeling and why he/she is reaching out to them as a mentor. The mentor should try and place him/herself in a position similar to the mentee. Ideally, the mentor had an influential person earlier in their lives who helped shape them and they relish the idea of doing the same for someone else.

Close to empathy is an *ability to listen* carefully. Listening is a characteristic of all successful people, particularly those in leadership positions. By listening carefully, the mentor should be able to determine the mentee's needs and be able to help guide them in their own development.

Finally, while we list this quality last it is still most important; that is the quality of *generosity*. The best mentors are generous with their time and advice. We feel those mentors who are predisposed to generosity are the best potential mentors.

How do you know if someone is generous? Pay attention and carefully observe a person's behavior. If, for example, during the first informal session your prospective mentor is in a hurry or begrudgingly gives you time, then most likely that person is not a good candidate to become your mentor. Conversely, if your potential mentor has warmth and enjoys the exchange in an unhurried manner, that person most likely is a strong mentor candidate.

The most important thing is that you both “click.” Mentorship at its best is a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties. It may take time to find the right mentor, but when you do, you both will know it and will enjoy the process of your mentorship.

### **Why Be a Mentor?**

We've touched on some of the more altruistic reasons for becoming a mentor in our first article. We enjoy sharing what we know with others, particularly, those who reach out for help. We feel that in a way mentoring others is a way of paying back those who have mentored us in our careers and other aspects of our lives. For those who believe in karma, mentoring can be one good thing you do and, in turn, other good things might come your way. On the most fundamental level, mentoring is just being a decent human being. It might sound corny, but when we mentor others we feel good about ourselves.

Many mentors may also get an ego boost from mentoring. After all, the mentee has approached them because the mentor is a subject matter expert and, presumably, quite talented and can share the wisdom that they've learned. It feels good to be recognized for your accomplishments and being approached by a mentee because you have expertise in a particular area may not be the flashiest way to be recognized, but it can be deep and fulfilling.

On a very practical level, mentorship can be one of the best ways to get younger employees up to speed on a job. This type of mentorship can allow someone who may be a few years out from retirement to be able to transfer their knowledge so they can leave their employer knowing that the work they've done so diligently over the years is handled by someone that they have personally prepared. Most industries are facing a talent drain as their Baby Boomer employees retire, so matching them up with newer hires as part of a mentoring program would be an excellent way to capture their knowledge and pass it along to the next generation.

### **Building Your “Kitchen Cabinet”**

The term “Kitchen Cabinet” originated during the presidency of Andrew Jackson. “Kitchen Cabinet” meant an informal group of advisors who were not official Cabinet members confirmed by the United States Senate. In President Jackson’s case, it was a group of cronies from his days as a Nashville, Tennessee, lawyer and soldier. Likewise, President Harry Truman was famous for having a “Kitchen Cabinet,” composed of poker-playing, bourbon-drinking buddies from his Missouri days.

Who is in your “kitchen cabinet”? It should contain a team of mentors who are subject matter experts in different areas in which you would like to grow. Jack keeps in touch with anyone who can help him grow and learn. For example, he is blessed to have three well-qualified lawyers in his life— one being his brother— he can bounce legal questions off of.

Jack has also cultivated a wide variety of “McHugh Advisors” who will provide expert advice in a variety of publishing matters, his business specialty. For example, a few years ago Jack added Liz to his “kitchen cabinet,” sensing her expertise in association magazine publishing. Since then, Liz and Jack have co-authored a number of articles and have become friends.

Likewise, Liz has her own “kitchen cabinet” consisting of marketing gurus, a retired public relations specialist, a professional development coach and publishing experts like Jack. For more ad hoc questions and advice, she will often turn to former coworkers, members of her business school cohort, and contacts made from volunteering on various committees.

### **A Word for Employers on Mentorship**

With low unemployment rates and an ever-increasing number of Baby Boomers retiring, most industries are struggling to attract and retain next generation talent. The emerging workforce appears to be very interested in continuing education and a well-defined career path with their employers. A robust mentorship program within your organization or your business partners would be a low (or no) cost way to help you gain insights into what this demographic wants. Mentorship can help you identify your most promising future leaders as well as give your organization the best possible opportunity to nurture their talent. This kind of investment will often result in more loyalty than if the employee had to navigate this process without any guidance. It also shows them that you care about their goals and want to help them succeed.

### **Final Thoughts on Mentorship**

Mentorship takes many forms. It can be the “kitchen cabinet” approach, where you have a network that you’ve cultivated to the point where you can reach out to the person with the right expertise with your ad hoc questions, or it can be a more formal relationship with regular conversations. We hope that we’ve shown the value of mentorship to both the mentee and the mentor, and that we may have inspired you to either reach out and find a mentor or be more likely to mentor someone who approaches you for advice.

## **About the Authors**

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Liz Novak has held various roles with the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD) since joining the organization in 2011. She is currently the Senior Director of Advocacy and Editor-In-Chief. She is responsible for IAPD’s government relations initiatives and political action committee, the editorial content for all of IAPD’s publications and assists her CEO with responsibilities related to IAPD’s Board of Directors and Executive Committee. During her tenure at IAPD, she also served as Marketing Director for seven years, before promoting her protégé to the role. Liz holds a bachelor of science degree from Loyola University of Chicago and an MBA from the Pennsylvania State University Smeal College of Business. She earned her CAE in 2017. Contact: [www.linkedin.com/in/lnovak](http://www.linkedin.com/in/lnovak).

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