



# ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

Mentor-protégé relationships and the value of lifelong learning

**BY J.N. WHIDDON**

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Every man I meet is my superior in some way; and in that I can learn of him.” This is especially true when it comes to mentors.

Simply put, no one gets there alone. No matter how gifted you are, eventually you will need help or guidance. It is important not to pass up opportunities that present themselves. After all, being mentored by one of the best is a sure way to enhance your leadership skills and ensure your success. It follows in any profession—if your mentor has succeeded, you likely will too.

## Trusting Someone Older and Wiser

I want to tell you a true story about a young professional and his mentor—who stressed the importance of becoming a lifelong learner. Mike was the high school valedictorian who earned a scholarship to one of the largest and most prestigious state universities in the country. To make ends meet, he worked fast food jobs while taking a full load of classes. After graduation, Mike became successful in his vocational endeavors as well. Married to the love of his life, three beautiful daughters were added along the way, and he continued on a rising professional trajectory—now 15 years in.

Yet, while he had a strong educational foundation and was dedicated to staying on pace with the expertise he needed to excel at his profession, Mike was not a reader, *per se*. That all changed when his mentor created a one-year blueprint of a “lifelong learning curriculum” for him to follow. The reading list included books that had nothing to do with his vocation. Although reluctant at first, he trusted his mentor and ultimately grew to enjoy the reading.

He came to understand topics he never dreamt he would explore, and the subject matter crossover effect proved to be highly advantageous. Learning about sociology and psychology, economics and finance, history and government, and even reading biographies and fiction made him feel more comfortable in business and social situations than ever. And, quite frankly, he felt wise beyond his years. Humble, mind you, but wise.

Now 35, the impact of this lifelong learning advice from his mentor became clear when Mike was visiting a client out on the road. He found himself at a dinner party arranged especially for him in order to meet a dozen of his client’s closest friends. It

was a great opportunity to meet some important contacts and potentially lead to new business relationships. However, the average guest was well over 60—with the youngest still being north of 50. Most people Mike’s age might have been intimidated in this atmosphere—watching the clock and hoping to escape the evening without a major faux pas—but not Mike. He relished it. He seized it.

When Mike later related the experience to his mentor, he emphasized that he had never felt more comfortable because there was not a single topic of conversation that he did not feel confident engaging in. The dozens of books he read during his lifelong learning program prepared him unimaginably well, and he felt blessed to have crossed paths with his mentor.

Mike was able to excel as a young professional because he watched for valuable opportunities. He found a skilled mentor who challenged and guided him as he sharpened his skills. Mike accepted the challenge of lifelong learning, and the payoffs have only just begun.

## Finding the Right Mentor

Perhaps now is the time for you to join Mike by finding a good mentor and becoming a worthy protégé.

Since mentoring begins with the mentee, you want to be the kind of person a mentor would take great satisfaction in pouring effort into. After all, good mentors are dedicated to making their protégés successful. So before you start looking, do a self-assessment. A good place to start is considering how you stack up in these three aspects:

**1 Are you a good communicator?** In order to get the most out of any relationship, communication is key. Study and learn effective communication skills—and remember that asking great questions is skill number one.

**2 Are you coachable?** An eagerness to learn and follow instructions in spite of their unfamiliarity is of paramount importance. Remember, if everything a mentor told you sounded familiar, you wouldn’t need their advice. Be open to criticism and maintain a positive attitude.

**3 Are you a lifelong learner?** Any mentor worth their salt is going to demand that you become a dedicated learner—even outside your field of expertise. And that means a robust reading program.

## Passing on Lessons Learned

One simple technique for becoming a protégé was introduced to me by a good friend and mentor, Dave. When he turned 20 years old, he found a 30-year old friend and simply asked him, “What did you learn in the last decade—the one I am entering—that would be a lesson you could pass on to me?”

Subsequently, after entering each new decade, he finds a person 10 years older—someone that he considers wise enough to be his mentor—and asks the same question. The bottom line: Seeking out someone older and wiser to become your next mentor is a good decision at any age. 🌟



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