

PAVE THE WAY TO SUCCESS

How to make the most of your professional mentor



BY LEI WANG

As a working professional, you have probably heard many stories of how other people credit their success to their mentors. Working with a mentor can truly pave the way to success in one's career, but oftentimes creating—and maintaining—the mentor-mentee relationship can be challenging. Maybe your company does not offer a formal mentorship program or maybe you simply feel that you're not receiving much value out of your current mentor.

The key to crafting a successful relationship with a professional mentor is to look outside the box and identify individuals who can offer the best professional guidance.

Not Every Mentor is Obvious

A mentor is someone who watches out for you and gives you advice. Unlike a “forced” relationship between a boss and subordinates, or a contract relationship between a coach/teacher and students, the relationship between a mentor and a mentee is often informal.

In fact, some don’t wear a hat 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 in your life or career until much later.

There’s a tendency to determine the value of advice based on who it came from. When you receive guidance from someone that you regard as your superior—someone with an impressive title—you’re more likely give their advice more weight and take it more seriously. But sometimes, the most insightful advice can come from someone among your peers, an outsider or even someone you considered less knowledgeable than you. Sometimes the most innovative idea may come from a novice in the field. For a senior manager, you may find the best perspectives come from your subordinates or people of the lowest rank in your business.

Have you noticed mentors in your life or in your career? Do not dismiss advice from someone you had underestimated. Keep an open mind and a humble attitude. After all, your best mentors could be anywhere.

Learn to Ask for Help

Now that you know how to discover your mentors, you need to learn when to seek their help. There is tremendous value in self-teaching, learning through practice and learning through mistakes.

But it is important to recognize when to seek out help. Some skills can only be accumulated over time, but others are a matter of knowledge and experience. There is no need to reinvent every wheel. Human progress is made on the foundation laid by previous generations. You reach further by standing at a higher ground to start with, so it is important to recognize when to ask for help.

Asking for help where it matters is a sign of strength, instead of weakness. Getting the right help at a certain point could be the difference between missed opportunities or gaining fast momentum early so you’re at the right place at the right time.

Get the Most Out of a Mentoring Relationship

Since mentors are not “obligated” to you, you have to work extremely hard and be driven and passionate so as to attract their attention and to deserve their time and effort. The reward for the mentor is not money or promotions at work, but seeing the result and seeing how they can make a difference in your progress.

To get the best out of a mentoring or coaching relationship, you first need to know how to listen to advice. Like in all communication, effective listening requires you to give up any prejudgment of what you hear. The most damaging prejudgment is not about deciding if the advice is right or wrong, but telling yourself, “I know this already.” When you think that, you quickly determine that the advice—though valid—is of no new value.

Often, when great advice motivates you to take the right action, it is not because it is new advice. You may have heard it many times before. But sometimes following that advice worked only when it clicked with you, when you really listened and when you were more capable of understanding the advice. Listen to every piece of

familiar advice like it is new. Instead of thinking “I know,” ask yourself if you’ve mastered it and if you’ve seen results. If the answer is no, make a plan and take action.

Become Your Own Motivator

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

It is also important not to rely on professional help as a crutch forever. The goal of seeking professional help is to shorten your learning path and to become independent and competent faster. When you are on the real battlefield, no one can do your work for you. You have to do it for yourself and you cannot go far if you have to rely solely on external motivation. Ultimately, you have to learn to be your own motivator.

In Summary

Seeking help and finding mentors is an important strategy for getting where you want to go in your career. Learning to listen to advice and keeping an open mind to recognize those around you who can serve the role of mentor will broaden the opportunities you have for learning. While self-teaching is an important practice and can go a long way to helping you learn basic skills, coaches will know what you need and how to help you reach those goals. ✪



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