

Strategy: Consider how you might be able to set up a career “mentorship program” with someone you admire, to further support your career goal.

What is a Mentor?

A **mentor** is a trusted, more experienced person who takes an interest in, and supports and guides a less experienced person pursuing goals or status the mentor has already achieved. The person being mentored is sometimes referred to as a “mentee.” A classic example of a mentor in popular culture is Yoda, who mentored Luke Skywalker in the Star Wars films.

Apprenticeship is one common example of mentorship in the workplace. Structured mentoring of new employees can also be found in teaching (Salinitri), nursing (Campbell) and other professions that involve extensive on-the-job learning. For example, in some school districts, new teachers are paired with experienced teachers and given extra professional development time for regular meetings to discuss the new teacher’s progress and challenges.

What is a Career Mentor?

A **career mentor** offers guidance, advice and support around career-building, and workplace challenges. Research shows that effective mentoring can help employees adapt to new organizations and can contribute to reduced turnover rates, increased career satisfaction and even higher salaries (Scandura and Aviator, 1994). Canadian psychologist, Dr. Steven Stein, author of *Make Your Workplace Great: The Seven Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization*, advises companies to encourage their employees to find mentors. “The mentor can add valuable career advice on training, skills building and career opportunities. A mentor can also review career goals and provide guidance.”

Mentors can also be the source of inside information that can help a mentee’s career advance more quickly. The knowledge and insight gained in a mentor/mentee relationship can also help people be more effective in their jobs and more hopeful about future prospects. These are all important factors in *Staying on Top of Your Game™* at work.

Occasionally, a supervisor and employee may develop a mentor/mentee relationship, but often, a career mentor is someone other than an immediate supervisor. Possible examples include: a senior staff person from another department, an experienced person in the same profession who works for a different company, or a trusted elder, such as an uncle or family friend.

How does the mentor/mentee relationship work?

Mentorship can work in various ways, ranging from very informal to very structured, depending on the nature of the relationship between the two individuals and the time they have available. William Hogue and Ernest Pringle, two executives from the University of South Carolina who have written about their own mentoring relationship, say that successful relationships are built on certain guiding principles which include:

- **Mutual benefits** – mentor and mentee have chosen to commit to the relationship and both should benefit
- **Confidentiality** – a commitment to confidentiality helps mentor and mentee to communicate honestly and freely
- **Honesty** – an essential component of all effective relationships
- **Flexibility** – many administrators report that relatively unstructured relationships work best
- **Building a working partnership** – career mentoring relationships are often built around shared professional goals
- **Listening and Learning** – the viewpoints, ideas and questions of both mentor and mentee need to be heard and respected
- **Leading by Example** – as one of the oldest and truest proverbs goes, “Actions speak louder than words.”

Many mentors and mentees meet regularly. Some get together as often as monthly, while others meet three or four times a year. In some cases, each person brings an agenda list of topics or issues to discuss at each meeting. In others, the relationship is relatively unstructured. Ideally, the relationship should last for at least a year or two, but some career mentoring relationships last for many years.

Finding a Career Mentor

How you find your mentor will depend on a number of factors, including your profession and the size of the company or business you work for. Here are some ideas:

- Some companies have career mentorship programs. If you work for a large employer, ask your supervisor or someone from the human resources department if there is a career mentorship program at your workplace.
- Approach someone you admire. You don't have to start off by saying, “Hi, will you be my career mentor?” In fact, it's often best to begin with a low key approach, “I was wondering if we could meet. I admire your work and I'd like to bounce a few ideas off you.” This reduces the pressure on the person to make a long-term mentoring commitment right away and gives the two of you a chance to get to know each other.

Getting Started

Once your career mentor has agreed to meet with you regularly, take the initiative in setting up the schedule. Ask how often he or she would be available to meet. Be prepared to make a suggestion like, “I was thinking I could buy you lunch three times a year and we could discuss my career at our lunches?”

You might also ask if it's okay for you to send your mentor the occasional question by e-mail. If she or he agrees to this arrangement, be careful to respect your mentor's boundaries. Most people in positions of responsibility get dozens, if not hundreds of e-mails each day. You don't want to create too much extra work for your mentor.

What does your career mentor need from you?

There are some things that a career mentor will expect from you too. Here are some of them:

- Mentors will expect that you are serious about your career. Many established professionals like the idea of mentoring because they themselves were mentored early on in their careers. Thus, becoming a mentor is their way to "give something back," but they want to know their time with you will be well spent.
- Respect for their time: People who are asked to be mentors are usually successful and busy people. Don't demand too much of their time, be on time for meetings and end meetings on time.
- Pay for any food (or drinks, as the case may be). This is a way to show your mentor that you recognize he/she is providing something valuable and that you are the one who benefits most from the relationship.

References:

Campbell, C. "Mentoring in Nursing: Commitment with Results," *AAACN (American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing) Viewpoint*, November/December 2007. Web: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4022/is_200711/ai_n21280025/

T. A. Scandura and R. E. Viator, "Mentoring in Public Accounting Firms – An Analysis of Mentor-Protégé Relationships, Mentorship Functions, and Protégé Turnover Intentions," *Accounting Organizations and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 8, 1994, pp. 717–734.

Salinitri, G. "The New Teacher Induction Program: A Case Study on Its Effect on New Teachers and their Mentors," proceedings from the International Study Association on Teaching and Learning, 2007.

Resources:

The Value of a Mentor, Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

Web: http://www.quintcareers.com/mentor_value.html

Mentoring Relationships that Work, Charmon Parker Williams.

Web: <http://diversitybomagazine.com/mentor-relationships-that-work>

A Canadian website, with an emphasis on peer mentoring, but with information about professional mentoring as well: www.mentors.ca

"The Importance of Mentors in Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT," Metros, SE; Yang, C; *Educause*, Boulder. Co. Web:

<http://www.educause.edu/Resources/CultivatingCareersProfessional/Chapter5TheImportanceofMentors/10631>

Hogue, WF; Pringle, EM; "What's Next After You Say Hello: First Steps in Mentoring," *Educause*.

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<http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Quarterly/EDUCAUSEQuarterlyMagazineVolum/WhatsNextAfterYouSayHelloFirst/157344>

Stein, S. *Make Your Workplace Great: The Seven Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization*, John Wiley and Sons, 2007.