

How to find a mentor (and maximize your relationship)



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There are countless bits of career advice that can be found through a quick search on Google or by watching tutorial videos on YouTube, but often the best-kept secrets to success come from personal experiences.

Working with a mentor can help you learn from their experiences, ones that you will likely encounter in your future. Whether you just want to bounce ideas or need help crafting your first business plan for investors, having a mentor can be highly beneficial, from building your confidence to expanding your business ventures.

Here are four ways to start and maximize your relationship with a mentor:

Finding the right mentor

If you have a great relationship with them, previous managers or directors can be great mentors. Dennis Crowley, Foursquare founder, worked with his first boss, Ken Allard as his mentor to start Foursquare. They often can provide the best insight for your personal work style because they're more likely to understand how you work and operate.

While it's nice to have someone you idolize as a mentor, having someone who you can communicate with is even more crucial. Attend networking events or industry conferences to learn from and meet people who have been in your position before, and find a mentor who can share their experiences—both good and bad.

Mark Zuckerberg's mentor Sean Parker recognized his own mistake with Plaxo, his startup, and taught Zuckerberg the importance of balancing control over company shares.

Rajiv Shah, the Administrator of US Agency for International Development, worked closely with Patty Stonesifer, Chair of the Smithsonian Board of Regents, as his mentor. As he told CNNMoney, he found her to be one of his most important mentors because she taught him to keep communications open and include others in the problem-solving process.

Another option is to have more than one mentor—Brian Deese at the National Economic Council lists his four bosses as great mentors. As you get older, having multiple mentors can guide you through various experiences in life and business—whether it's getting past the startup hump or developing business models for an established company.

CBS News' president, David Rhodes, had two mentors to help him formulate different divisions of the company, like the hit TV program 60 Minutes and CBS Television Network.

Keep track of your meetings

Scheduling regular meetings can help build trust and deepen relationships. However, to get the most out of each meeting, take notes on the lessons learned and work to put them in action before the next meeting.

For example, if the topic of the meeting is client communication, work to incorporate that advice throughout the working week. When you have your next meeting, bring copies of your emails and discuss the improvements you've seen or need with your mentor.

Be open, but don't be afraid to push back

Going into a meeting with an agenda can set expectations and goals, but don't feel pressured to stick to the topics listed. Let the meeting trail beyond the agenda items as organic conversations can often lead to great ideas.

On a similar note, don't be afraid to ask challenging questions and start a debate. Debates force you to articulate your reasoning and thought process behind the idea you are defending.

Like any relationship, it's a two-way street. Not only will this be beneficial for you, but also for your mentor.

Take it outside

One of the best ways to learn is by seeing your mentor in action. Attend a conference where your mentor is speaking or shadow them for a day at a trade show.

Before the event, write down a few goals you hope to achieve and try to strike each out throughout the day. During the event, take the time to meet with your mentor's peers to expand your network.

For example, if one of your goals is to improve your public speaking, note how your mentor presents and connects with the audience. If another speaker's style catches your attention, ask what inspired his/her presentation.

After the conference is over, these notes can become great discussion points for your next meeting—going over any questions, observations and tips on how you can execute it.

While you may have all of the information in the world at your fingertips, sometimes the best lessons come from forging personal relationships with great leaders, peers and teachers. After all, many tech giants, like Bill Hewlett and David Packard, had a little help before they started their empire.