

Find (and Be) a Mentor and a Protégé

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Do you have a mentor? If your answer is yes, you know how valuable he or she is to your growth!

Do you have a protégé? If your answer is yes, you know the quantity and quality of contribution you are delivering into that person's life.

If your answer to either question is no, you've just discovered a lost opportunity!

In mentoring relationships, both parties grow. Clearly, the mentor stretches the protégé by assigning projects and generating thought-provoking questions.

The stretching process works the other way, too. By bringing real topics to the dialogue, the protégé (sometimes called a "mentee") calls upon the mentor's experience and likely causes him or her to rethink perspectives that have not been examined recently.

Maybe you think serving as a role model is enough. I say, "Not so!" Sure, younger leaders can watch what you do and emulate your behaviors. But they won't know why you chose one action over another. Having the freedom to ask, "Why did you do that?" and having you provide a deep and genuine answer gives future leaders valuable insight into how you think! That's a huge contribution to make to others!

Maybe you think you are sufficiently experienced that you don't need a mentor. I say, "Not so!" Let's presume you are THE leader in your organization. To whom do you go when you need to blow off steam? Or with whom do you do some "blue sky" dreaming about what could be?

As THE leader, if you go to anyone else in your organization, you run the risk that person will unilaterally take some action that could easily be disruptive. So, is holding it all in your only option? Will you never have the freedom to pull out your dreams and concerns, lay them on the table, and examine them with someone who could provide some beneficial insight?

Maybe that's why the field of executive coaching is growing so rapidly. If you have lots of experience, and if you've benefited from mentors in the past, you know the value of having someone you trust available for exploring possibilities with you!

So, let's say you want to build a relationship with a mentor or a protégé. Who should initiate the connection? YOU! There's no proper or improper way to initiate a mentoring relationship. What's important is that you respect the other individual and the chemistry "feels" right.

If you recognize the potential in the younger person and sense that he or she wants to learn and grow, offer your services. That individual might never have approached you, feeling that you are too busy (and maybe too important) to spend your time supporting and encouraging him or her.

If you are the younger person and can imagine the questions you'd like to ask of that more experienced person, by all means, go to that individual and respectfully ask. Sure, the answer might be no, but you're already not receiving his or her insights! If you obtain just one meeting with the individual, that's more than you had before. And maybe that person would be delighted to contribute to your growth.

Usually a mentoring relationship is with someone outside your direct chain of command. Why? The coaching relationship is expected between a boss and a direct report. Also, there are overtones in that authority relationship that can make healthy collaboration more difficult. You'd like to be able to ask very pointed questions without fearing potential repercussions.

Once involved in a mentoring relationship, both parties should occasionally evaluate what's working well and what could be improved. These two questions should be applied to both the process and the outcomes of your meetings. Let me explain.

The "process" is how you do what you do. How are agenda items determined for your meetings? Are the topics appropriate? Is there a healthy give and take to the dialogue? Is there a high level of honesty and trust? Does each person respect the other's time and other commitments?

The "outcome" is the result obtained from the relationship. Does each person leave with new insight and inspiration? Are the action steps generated in the meeting actually executed? Is confidentiality maintained when restricted or personal information is shared? Do both people leave the meeting looking forward to the next one?

Healthy mentoring relationships are hugely rewarding. When you serve as a constructive mentor, you not only pour into another person's life, you provide a terrific role model for that person serving as a mentor in the not too distant future! Should you initiate a new mentoring relationship this week?