

Mentoring--From the Mentee's Perspective

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Why wouldn't everyone want to have the benefit of a mentor? Oh, how I would have loved to experience a mentor early in my career! I was so naïve that I didn't know anything about mentoring relationships!

Usually someone who is a little older and more experienced is willing to serve--if your interest is sincere and you persevere in your request. Sometimes a mentor will seek you out, but more often it's the other way around. People who have the competency and level of caring required to be a good mentor are already busy in every facet of their lives. In fact, you may wonder, "Why would this person I respect be willing to encourage me?"

Potential mentors often do not have the time to survey the territory and evaluate all the young talent that is "out there" to determine who they will support. Many individuals, however, are willing to "give back" some of their time and energy. They realize they are not "self-made," and that many other individuals contributed to their growth. They may feel a responsibility to help groom the next generation of leaders.

The value a mentor receives from supporting you will likely be derived internally. You may not understand until much later why the mentor continues to deliver. However, the relationship may dissolve if you are not clear and consistent about what you want from the relationship.

"Learning," or one of its many various synonyms, is probably one of your dominant desired outcomes. Perhaps the desire is to grow in your career. Maybe you would like to avoid costly mistakes or seek ways to gain experience more quickly. Perhaps you want an introduction to resources, including special people you might not meet through your normal, everyday connections. You probably realize the image you project is important.

You'll not only want to emulate the behaviors of the mentor, but also understand the rationale for choosing one specific behavior over other options. You want challenge but also support and encouragement. There will be times when the mentor can help overcome obstacles, but few mentors will overtly intervene. They realize the growth occurs by having you do the work, even if there are occasional errors or failures.

The mentor may require that you pause and reflect on what you learned from a given experience. When you operate solely on your own, you are often so ready to move onto the next task that you don't take time to pause and evaluate what you did well and what you could do better next time. Many mentors offer that gift.

What is the mentee expected to deliver to the relationship? Your primary role is to show up prepared to engage the mentor. Early in a mentoring relationship, the mentor may offer some agenda items for consideration and may even have some desired outcomes in mind. However, you should quickly assume the responsibility for bringing the topics of conversation and for driving to some beneficial outcome.

You are the primary beneficiary of this mentoring relationship. If you do not drive the issues being addressed, the relationship may dissolve. The mentor is willing to spend time with you only if you genuinely want to learn and grow. If your behaviors don't demonstrate that interest, the mentor can easily find better things to do.

The agenda items are likely going to be opportunities where you can initiate significant improvement. You are the source of inquiry, posing the questions initially. The mentor offers deeper, more far-reaching perspectives. You both seek possible answers. There are usually many options before any one answer emerges victorious.

You take the lead in generating a plan of who will do what by when. Usually, you are expected to report significant progress against the plan by the next time the two of you meet.

As in any relationship, mutual respect is necessary. Further, you should express gratitude often. The mentor's time, experience, and energy are a gift. If you're not appreciative, the mentor may focus elsewhere!

Why does a mentee stay in a mentoring relationship? The "chemistry" is good. The mentor continues to stretch your thinking, offers stimulating insights, and rejoices with you when you overcome obstacles.

You can tell that you are growing faster with the mentor's help than would occur without it. The mentor offers honest and helpful feedback, even if it stings for a short period. You feel certain that the mentor has your best long-term interests in mind. Your appreciation for what the mentor offers to you continues to grow.

Over time, you may find your relationship transforms from you receiving the nurturing of a mature advisor to a more mutually encouraging, collaborative friendship. When that occurs, celebrate the metamorphosis!