

FIND YOURSELF THE MENTORING YOU NEED

This advisory used to be called: Go Find Yourself a Mentor. It turns out, however, that it makes better sense to suggest finding for yourself the mentoring that you need. Mentors provide many different functions—please see the list below—and different people can and do provide different kinds of support.

One of my major bits of advice for all people of color and women in nontraditional environments is to find themselves the mentoring they need. And of course this idea is important for everyone in every organization—everyone needs good mentoring—and everyone can offer support to others—in every environment.

A mentor can be any race or sex or age. You do not even have to *like* the person—you have a very wide range of people to choose from, including both pleasant people and those you consider to be difficult. Anyone is appropriate, so long as the person is competent and responsible, and as long as you respect them. (Bad mentoring also exists. Stay out of the way of people you do not respect.)

Often junior people are told to find role models, preferably same-sex, same-race, likable ones, hopefully of the same sexual orientation and value structure. One is told to find this saint and then learn to be like them. Saints, however, are few. Therefore, it is easier just to find mentors. Even a crusty grouch can be encouraged to be a mentor, just so long as that person is honorable and knows more than you do about the topic at hand—or a skill that you need—or an opportunity that you might like.

A mentor is a person who comments on your work, criticizing errors and encouraging excellence. This person sets high standards and teaches you to set and meet your own high standards. A mentor teaches you how the System works. If you are in a hospital, in government, in industry or in academe, you learn the organization chart and also how the place really works. You learn how to succeed in your training, how to succeed in your work, how to contribute effectively on a team, and how to get promoted on the basis of excellent work. You learn the foundations of professional integrity.

Mentors teach you which intellectual and business and aesthetic challenges are important, and how to recognize them yourself. They apprentice you to proposal writing, artistic performance, conference presentation, how to negotiate, how to construct a budget. They introduce you to important networks, talk about your work to others, and help to find you jobs. Initially, they are your evaluators and the linkage to other evaluators. A mentor may be able to help defend you if you are abused or mistreated, and may be able to help you to learn how to deal with conflicts. They teach you how to set your own goals, how to evaluate yourself realistically and how to succeed. They inspire you.

Some women find it hard to acquire a mentor. Senior women may be exhausted, and a few may like being one of a small number of highly successful women in an organization. Senior men sometimes ignore women. A few will see women as sex objects, or they avoid mentoring women because women can be seen as sex objects, and someone might take offense. Junior women (and men) are often shy. What can junior women (and men) do to find a mentor, even if they feel shy?

Many people can be helped to become your mentor. I mean this, of course, not in a Machiavellian, exploitative sense, but in the context of respectful, honest behavior on your part. Take responsibility for finding decent mentors. Figure out what kinds of mentoring you need (look at the list below) and go look for good mentoring.

First you need to observe carefully the people with whom you are dealing. Be receptive to advice and counsel offered to you from competent people. However, stay away from people who want to use you or hurt you, even if you are attracted to them or their work. Because negative or destructive mentorship is also a possibility, it is important never to engage emotionally with people who do not care about your welfare—and who care only about themselves.

Do not pick fights or respond to provocation from negative mentors. If you can, keep your distance. That is, when possible, stay away from such people, and in any case do not engage emotionally with them.

When you find honorable people who know more than you in any important arena, learn from them. Be both receptive and responsive. You do not want to “use” other people yourself; the reward to others from helping you lies in your own responsiveness and creativity. Thank others for any help you get. Give credit with scrupulous care to those who help; bring credit to all your mentors for having sponsored and helped you. Here are some possible steps:

1. Introduce yourself; make the first contact—always on a professional subject. Go up after a meeting. Enter an audition so your work will be noticed. Write a letter to an expert, asking an important question. Comment thoughtfully on their last report or article or achievement; send your conference presentation in draft, for comment. (Send something you are proud of.)
2. Do it again, respectfully and intelligently.
3. Begin to ask for help about what you are doing well and where you can do better. Cherish the good advice you are given and thank your mentors when they are helpful. Say it even if they brush it off or say, “It was nothing.” Be sure you acknowledge all the help you are given.
4. See if you can apprentice yourself to a more knowledgeable person on any part of an interesting project, and work hard.

5. As you get to know a mentor, be friendly, open and very professional. Get to know their spouse or partner—if this is appropriate—and introduce your own friends as appropriate. Avoid any kind of conflict of interest if you can—stay away from ambiguous situations with respect to intellectual property, personal work, and any interaction that could be construed as unprofessional. Keep yourself appropriately independent. If a lot of work is accomplished on a team, make sure you get reasonable credit for your contributions. Try to be independent enough to move to another job or another city to advance if that becomes necessary.
6. Seek out several or even many mentors if possible. Nobody is or can be perfect at everything. You will learn different things from different people. Mentors provide many different functions (see the list below). Peers and junior colleagues may be some of the best mentors you will have, including those you might meet on a professional listserv.
7. Do whatever you can to help your mentors forever after. Be generous—give credit in public for the help you’ve gotten—and give help to others wherever you can throughout your life. This reinforces good behavior everywhere. It will encourage you to become a first-rate mentor. (And with care and practice you may even become a good role model for mentors.)

Various kinds of mentoring that might be useful:¹

Cheerleader
Coach
Confidant
Counselor
Developer of Talent
Griot (oral historian for the organization or profession)
Guardian
Guru
Inspiration
Integrity Role Model
Master
Opener of doors
Patron
Personal and Professional Role Model
Pioneer
Seminal Source
Successful Leader
Teacher

¹ Used and adapted with permission from the MIT Sloan Master Thesis, “Mentoring” by Robert L Davis, Jr. and Patricia A Garrison, 1979