



Career Advancement

7 Steps to a Great Mentorship

By Cathryn Vandewater on December 01, 2010 | [Post a Comment](#)

Some things can only be learned through personal experience.

But if you're new to a career or company, who's to say you can't use someone else's? Mentoring with a more senior professional can pay big dividends in personal and professional development. Choose the right influence, and your mentor may just help you perfect your professional image, your work patterns, and even alter your career path.

But if you've never been a protégé, navigating the half personal, half professional waters of a mentorship can be daunting. *The Mentee's Guide* author and mentoring expert Lois J. Zachary sheds some light on the pluses and pitfalls.

1. Who to ask?

The first step, of course, is having a pool of possibilities. Zachary recommends milling your network and always staying in touch. "Follow up with people you meet; they know people who know people."

As for traits your ideal mentor ought to have, the answer lies within your needs, goals, and your prospective mentor's availability: "It's easy to be swept away by personalities," Zachary says. "But if learning is really the focus, you have to make sure that the person that you select as a mentor has the experience, the willingness, and the time to mentor you. You've got to make sure that there is a good learning fit."

Chemistry and friendship are also important, because they help time with your mentor transcend an all-business feel. "Because of the time pressure, mentoring often becomes a transaction rather than a learning opportunity," Zachary warns. "People don't engage in conversation, they exchange information. And mentoring is more than that."

2. Where to Start

A common mistake in any occupational endeavor is putting a great deal of the effort into getting an opportunity, and very little thought into shaping the actual experience.

To ensure a successful mentorship (or at very least, a meaningful closure and a referral), Zachary recommends setting goals and ground rules right away: "Talk about your different styles early on," and be clear about both of your needs. "Do you need lots of information, lots of back up material—what helps you learn best?" she suggests asking.

Starting off on a trusting, candid note will set an efficient, respectful tone for the course of the partnership. And you may find that giving thoughtful feedback to your mentor will earn you the same in return. "Be open to feedback—be willing to give feedback," Zachary advises.

3. Setting Goals

Zachary emphasizes that the relationship is collaborative—and your role should be an active one. "You're working on your own development. It's not about fixing you; it's about the long term picture, moving forward, creating momentum in your career development."

To facilitate this development, Zachary recommends using SMART goals: specific, measurable, action-oriented, and timely. Having reasonable, tangible goals—like improving your leadership skills—gives you a means of measuring your progress and provides a shape (and possible end point) to your time with your mentor. They can also give both parties a sense of achievement.

And make a point of being honest about both your strengths and weakness—"not posturing, but really aligning what you say, what you feel, and what you do," she emphasizes. "If you hide your vulnerabilities, your mentor will not truly grasp what you need to improve. You must be candid so you can turn weaknesses into strengths."

4. Communicating Effectively

Zachary points out that a successful mentoring relationship requires consistent communication and exchange of feedback. "People often think that their intentions are enough to ensure good mentoring relationships and they're not."

Knowing each other before beginning an official mentorship—as Zachary recommends—is beneficial to your professional interactions, because you'll have a better understanding of your respective communication styles. But even if you're sure you get each other, be crystal clear regarding expectations.

"Check in at the end of the meeting to make sure that you're both getting what you want and need; what's working, and what's not working," Zachary says. Above all, "don't assume things are fine!"

5. Getting What You Want

However intelligent and experienced your mentor is, he or she can't ascertain your career goals or trouble areas with nothing to go on.

"Be as specific and descriptive as possible," Zachary urges. "Don't assume your mentor understands your particular work context." Even if the two of you work for the same company, be sure to give a distinct picture of your job and the aspects of it you find challenging. "They may have been-there-done-that in a different part of the organization, certainly with different people."

For the most useful feedback, give specific examples of your work and ask for pointers on areas of concern. Zachary gives example questions regarding a presentation: "Am I coming across as a strong leader?" "Am I being direct in what I'm saying?" "Is this relevant to the needs of the organization?"

Know where you need help, and you'll get exactly the advice you need—and save valuable time.

6. Handling Obstacles

It's a good idea to assume you'll encounter obstacles when you start a mentoring relationship—and to be prepared to deal with them.

In your first meeting with your mentor, set ground rules, with your mentor's input. "What process are we going to use if we've come up against an obstacle or a stumbling block?" Zachary suggests asking. Discussing the possibility of conflicts will take the sting out of them should they arise, since, as Zachary notes, "if you put a process in place, it doesn't become personal."

Other decisions to make: who's going to take meeting notes, how often you're going to meet, and what your agendas will be like—this way, duties are clear and no resentment will arise over who's doing all the work. Same goes for confidentiality agreements.

7. The Wrap Up

When you feel like things are coming to a close, Zachary advises referencing your progress to help wind down your meetings: "I have learned so much. What's do you think about be the next logical step for me?" Your mentor might then suggest a few areas for improvement, at which point you could ask them to recommend a colleague or friend to get in touch with.

Then, don't feel guilty about moving on. "You have a career goal of XYZ and you need multiple mentors to get there," explains Zachary. "You work on different goals with different people."

Even if the mentorship is a disaster, you never want to let a relationship fizzle out on its own. "The closure conversation is where you review what you learned and talk about it," Zachary points out, "and you talk about how you can use what you learned."

Skipping that means losing out on great takeaways about your progress, and insight on where you need to go. It could also mean missing out on an honest appraisal of how parts of the relationship had broken down—which is vital to your relationships going forward.

"It's not just about climbing the career ladder," Zachary declares. "It can be about the career *lateral*, which means going across and getting better at what you do. It's about the breadth, the depth."

Dr. Lois Zachary is an internationally recognized expert in mentoring, and the president of Leadership Development Services, LLC. Her best-selling books, The Mentor's Guide, Creating a Mentoring Culture and most recently, The Mentee's Guide, have become the primary resources of Fortune 500 companies, government, education, technology, health-care and nonprofit organizations interested in promoting mentoring for leadership and learning.