

MAKE MENTORING WORK FOR YOU: TEN STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Mentoring is an ideal growth and development opportunity for learning professionals at every level, but especially those who are new to an organization, responsibility, or team. Remember that it is far easier to talk about, promote, and support mentoring when you can draw examples from your own experience.

By Lois J. Zachary

The pervasiveness and popularity of mentoring is undeniable. That it results in significant personal growth and career development is indisputable. That it holds the potential to change people's perspectives and the quality of their lives is irrefutable.

Learning and development professionals spend a great deal of time and effort championing mentoring in their organizations. And yet, they are often the last to participate in mentoring relationships that might benefit their own personal growth and development.

If this describes you, know that you are not alone. Lack of time is one of the most frequently cited reasons for lack of mentoring success. Time will always be an issue; it isn't as much about finding the time as it is about making the best use of the time that you do have. And that means knowing how to make mentoring work for you.

1 | Understand the current mentoring paradigm

The current paradigm has evolved alongside our understanding about how adults learn best. The model of the 1970s and 80s that focused on a more experienced (often older) adult passing on knowledge and information to a less experienced adult has shifted. The mentee plays an active role, the mentor functions as a learning facilitator rather than an authority, and critical



“Mentoring is a reciprocal learning relationship in which mentoring partners agree to a partnership in which they work collaboratively toward achieving mutually defined goals that focus on developing mentee skills, abilities, knowledge, and/or thinking.”

(Zachary, *T+D* 2005) //



reflection and self-directed learning drive the relationship.

2 | Do the preparation work

Before you fully engage with a mentor, identify what you really want to achieve, how you learn best, and what kind of mentoring relationship might work well for you.

Think about past mentors who have been there to guide and strengthen you. Consider what worked well in those relationships, what could have gone better, and how you contributed to the success of that relationship. You may discover, for example, that you had a hard time asking for help or sharing your vulnerabilities and, on reflection, you realize that you could have gotten more from the experience had you been willing to reveal more of yourself. These kinds of insights can help you make decisions about who would be a good mentor for you, and they can be shared with a new mentor to help you both find ways to work together effectively.

3 | Use criteria to identify, seek, and select the right mentor

The decision to participate in mentoring needs to be deliberate and well thought-out. If you use criteria rather than rely on chemistry alone, you will make a sounder decision.

First, you need to decide on what you must have in the relationship and what you want. Second, prioritize your wants. Third, develop a matrix and assess possible mentors. When you use criteria to select a mentor, it helps you clarify what you need; keeps the focus

on end results, needs, and wants; and minimizes personal bias.

4 | Bring your “self” to the relationship

Just because a mentor may have mentored others successfully doesn't mean that she is an expert on the most important aspect of the current mentoring relationship—you! Don't assume that because a mentor has been there and done that, she knows the details of your situation. Mentors need to be able to “walk in your shoes” and understand your context. It is important to be open and honest about your strengths and challenges. Be descriptive. Use metaphors and stories.

5 | Establish agreements up front

Agreements lay the groundwork for the relationship, and while a strong mentor can help you, the responsibility for keeping the focus on your learning lies with you. Work with your mentor to create SMART (specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, and timely) learning goals. This is a process and often begins with “starter” goals that develop into SMART goals with your mentor's guidance.

Establish relationship ground rules and confidentiality safeguards, and agree on how you will handle obstacles and stumbling blocks so that they don't undermine trust or derail the relationship. Put a work plan in place to create the momentum for moving forward.

6 | Ask for what you need

You must approach a mentoring relationship with self-awareness about your learning needs. By articulating needs clearly, it helps accelerate your learning and allows you to play an active role in making sure that they are being met.

Mentees have different learning styles. Some people need the big picture, some need data, some need the learning to be practical, and others like to learn by trial and error. Talk to your mentor about how you learn best. It will save you time and speed the learning.

A mentor's role is to facilitate your growth and development. Challenge yourself and make sure your mentor

challenges you to stretch, take risks, and explore new ways of working.

7 | Routinely check in and check things out

Early on, establish a process to assess your mentoring relationship to make sure you are on track to achieve your mentoring goals. Things may be going well, but don't take it for granted. Make it a habit to regularly check in with your mentor.

- **Focus on your learning goals.** Are they still relevant? Are you making measurable progress?
- **Focus on your relationship.** Is the relationship positive for both you and your mentor? What do you need to do more of to strengthen it?
- **Focus on the learning process.** Is the process working for you? Is the pace of the learning on target? Is the content of the learning relevant to you?
- **Focus on meeting time.** Monitor your meetings and evaluate how you spend your time. Always have a mentoring meeting date on the calendar, be it virtual or face-to-face interaction.

8 | Use your time wisely

You *and* your mentor need to make a commitment to honor the time, use it well, and monitor it. Dealing with time concerns requires an ongoing awareness of how time is spent.

Make mentoring prime time. Focus totally and completely when you are with your mentoring partner. A mentor is giving you the gift of his time and you need to do the same.

Stop if you are wasting time. Call “time out” when it is in your best interest. For example, you may find that your role at work is changing or that you are just too overloaded to focus on mentoring.

9 | Seek feedback

Mentees accelerate their development and enhance their mentoring relationships by asking for feedback regularly. Don't wait for feedback to come to you. The more specific and descriptive you are, the more specific and helpful the feedback you receive will be.

Receiving feedback is a challenge for many mentees. Keep in mind that you

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don't have to agree with it. You need to be curious about the effect of your behavior and not defensive. Feedback is not about your worth, but about your behavior.

10 | Regularly reflect on what you are learning

Journaling is one of the most powerful ways to promote systematic reflection. A journal is a tool to help make the most of your reflective powers by combining hindsight, insight, and foresight. It helps you to clarify thinking, stimulate new insights, remember specific details of mentoring experiences, and log your mentoring experience.

Reflecting on journal entries at the end of a mentoring relationship helps a mentee trace her developmental journey (hindsight), gain further insight, and continue the momentum along her career path (foresight).

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