

# Attracting Mentors

## **Mentors? Trusted advisors? Do you have these? Do you know what they are?**

No person is an island. We have all been influenced by other people. Those people can take many roles in our lives. In terms of your personal and professional development, the roles of mentors and trusted advisors are extremely important. Yet how do these roles differ?

This section is about mentors: what purposes they serve and how to find one. This is not going to be a step-by-step guide; rather, it is an overview to get you headed in the right direction.

## **What is a mentor?**

The term mentor gets thrown around today with quite a few different meanings. According to Merriam Webster's, a mentor is someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person[i]. Usually this relationship is found in a work setting where a trade or skill is being passed down within a particular field. This is probably the most common understanding of a mentor.

However, there is a larger and more significant role a mentor can serve in a young adult's life beyond the scope of work and career. A noted expert in human development says the mentor relationship is one of the most complex and developmentally important relationships one can have in making the full transition into adult roles[ii]. In this context, it's hard to adequately define the mentor as a role; rather, we can look at the functions the mentor can serve. The mentor may be seen more as someone who, through wise or sage counsel, can help aid in the overall growth and character development of the young adult. People in elder generations have gained valuable experience, tacit wisdom, and broad knowledge about life and relationships that the younger generations lack. Unfortunately, not enough of these valuable intergenerational relationships exist where the parties can learn from one another.

The mentor may be 8-15 years your elder, representing a mixture of parent and peer roles, and should respect you as an autonomous adult capable of making your own decisions. A mentor should be someone you trust who genuinely cares for you and your well-being. He or she should have your best interest at heart and a desire to see you become a productive member of society, successful in your field, and broadly successful in life. A good mentor believes in you, seeks to get to know who you are, and wants to draw out your greatest potential. An excellent mentor can foster your development by helping support and facilitate the realization of your identity, purpose, and calling. Such a mentor will also not be afraid to challenge you and perhaps reflect some hard things back to you, but they can only do so if you have developed a genuine relationship of mutual trust and respect.

It's important to note that good mentors don't necessarily tell you what to do or make decisions for you. Rather, they help you sort out different scenarios and see the wisdom and consequences of different decisions or responses to life situations. If the mentor is telling you what to do, or you are allowing them to make decisions for you, this is not a mentor; this is more like an over-involved parent. Someone like this could be hindering your development, even if they have the best of intentions, because you would not be growing in your ability to make your own decisions and suffer the consequences or reap the rewards.

A properly invested and engaged mentor is a huge boon for anyone. I've been very fortunate to have many different mentors for different things in life that I've been able to go to with various needs, from work, to relationships, to ethical dilemmas, to personal and financial matters. The mentors I have selected are people I really

trust and those I believe exhibit a high level of integrity in their own lives. Some of my mentors have become good friends as I've grown older, yet I can still go to them as *trusted advisors*.

### **Trusted advisors**

While you may not yet have a true mentor, you probably have at least one person that you go to for advice. Perhaps you have several of these trusted advisors; one may be for professional inquiries, while another may be more focused on finances, relationships, or spiritual matters, and so on. Where do you go for advice in your life? They are called trusted because you want to not only trust they will keep things in confidence, but they should also have some credibility or authority in the given area in which you're seeking advice. In other words, while you may trust your peers, do they have the depth of wisdom or authority to be giving advice in the area you're seeking counsel?

Generally speaking, a trusted advisor is someone who you believe provides wise counsel on a specific topic or valuable insight to solving a particular problem. Advisors tend to be focused on solving a particular issue or answering a question; typically they do not provide the kind of holistic life guidance of a true mentor. They are usually less invested in your personal growth, but they are still respected enough to be a trusted source of counsel and advice. An advisor tends to be more focused and directed than a mentor; however, do not discount advisors entirely. They fulfill an important role in your development and growth, and certain advisors can become mentors themselves.

It's also worth noting that while mentors are different from someone you have gone to for advice, don't get too caught up in hard definitions. Be open to learning and glean whatever wisdom and insight you can from those with whom you engage.

### **Finding a mentor**

You should be selective in who you approach for mentoring. This is someone who will hopefully guide you through your growth, so you owe it to yourself to be picky. However, it's also helpful to remember what kind of mentor you're looking for. Are you looking for someone who can just teach you a specific trade? Or are you looking for someone who can help you process major life-decisions or give you guidance? Use your best judgment and gauge exactly how discerning you need to be.

You may want to be more discerning in who you receive counsel from depending on the area in which you are seeking help. Use your best judgment to gauge their level of experience and integrity in a given domain.

The best place to start finding a mentor is from the circle of people you already know. Use the relationship network web to write down all of the people you know who you think could possibly serve as a mentor to you. Presumably, since they know you and you know them, some trust may already exist. A good place to start would be people whom you truly admire and respect. Narrow that group down to people whom you believe would have your best interest at heart and have something they could teach you, whether it be about a profession or life in general. Seek out people with whom you have a genuine connection and build from there.

This is also a great use of the *Discovery Interviews*. In fact, you could even conduct Discovery Interviews with the objective of seeking a mentor. Keep in mind that people want to mentor someone they genuinely like and in whom they see some hidden potential. In fact, people often like to mentor those who remind them of themselves when they were younger. This is why it's a good idea to have done some of your own self-discovery beforehand. By having that information already sorted out, you can effectively communicate your values, gifts, strengths, weaknesses, dreams, desires, and vision.

## Approach

You may find that you already have a *trusted advisor* who may be primed to serve as a mentor. Is there anyone who you have gone to for advice in the past and you know you could go to them again? If you would like them to mentor you more actively, the easiest way to find out if this is possible is to simply ask them. They may inquire about what you mean by your request, so be prepared to give an answer concerning your desires.

After you think that you have identified someone that you would like to have mentor you, and you believe there is a natural connection (or that right “chemistry”), then you simply might ask them to mentor you. Be ready for some questions, and have an idea of what you are truly seeking to get from this relationship. Structured mentoring can be a foreign concept, and your prospective mentor may not know exactly what will be expected of them or what to expect of you. Someone with experience mentoring others may take the lead, but if your prospective mentor is new to mentoring, you need to be ready to explain what you have in mind. Your mentor will likely be thinking about how much time, effort and energy this might take away from their schedule. Be upfront with your ideas and goals, always be mindful of their time, and respect the fact that they will be volunteering their time for your benefit.

Alternatively, if you have some trusted advisors with whom you discussed your goals and obstacles, they may organically become mentors. In such cases, you may not even have to formally define the mentoring relationship and it will just sort of happen. Someone you regularly go to as a trusted advisor may inadvertently be mentoring you already. Whether or not you formally define the shift from advisor to mentor is up to you; there is no hard science to when your advisor becomes a mentor and you may not even have to discuss it. Just thank them for their mentorship and observe their response.

## Defining objectives

A mentoring relationship must have a purpose, whether explicit or implied, otherwise there is no point in meeting. When you are looking for a mentor, it’s important to know what you’re hoping to gain. What’s the point? A generic goal of personal growth is too vague; be more specific in terms of what areas you want to grow in. Otherwise, it makes it difficult to evaluate progress and puts undue pressure on the mentor to drive the process\*. When you approach someone to be your mentor, you must have some specific ideas or areas in how you want to grow or what you are trying to learn from them. This can be personal growth or professional growth but, either way, you the mentee should have an idea of where you want to go. This harkens back to the concept of *vision*: if you don’t know where you want to go, how are you going to get there? And more importantly, how can other people help you get there?

## Your objectives

It’s important to remember that the stated objectives should be your objectives, not anyone else’s\*. That seems obvious, but all too often we are influenced and guided by the expectations of others. This can include our mentors. It is not the role of the mentor to set a path before you and encourage you to walk it\*; they are there to help you find your own path, while offering their wisdom from their storehouse of life experience. A mentor should not be telling you what to do; rather, they should be helping you make your own decisions and come to your own conclusions. The mentor-mentee relationship should be a two-way street of respect, sharing and growth, not a situation where the mentor is living vicariously through the mentee.

## Other logistics

Other practical concerns to address are these: how often will you meet, and what will those meetings look like? Where will you meet? What are your expectations of the mentor? What are their expectations for you? Are you going to meet in person for an hour each week? Or will the mentoring be done over the phone? Who is going to be checking on whom? These are simple but vital points. It’s important that you and your mentor are both on

the same page from the beginning. Furthermore, be open to what they suggest. They are volunteering their time for you; if they give you homework or reading, be sure to do it. The mentoring process is a two-way street; don't expect the mentor to do all the work. Come prepared and be ready to engage them.

### **Conclusion of mentoring**

Almost all mentoring relationships come to some sort of end. Some may conclude as their natural gestation period is over and the mentor has given all they have to give. The natural duration for a good mentoring relationship could be months or even many years. Conversely, other mentoring relationships may fizzle because something doesn't seem to fit or you're not on the same page. At its heart, the mentor-mentee relationship is just like every other relationship; sometimes you and your prospective mentor just don't click. If you are not at peace with a prospective mentor, don't even let it get started in the first place.

### **Feeling out the natural flow**

If you have found a mentor and it's gone well and you both feel that you have reached the objectives you've set, then you may agree that the mentoring relationship can come to a close. This is a good and natural thing and your relationship may just take a different form, like back to a trusted advisor or even a good friend or colleague. Or the mentoring relationship could go through seasons where it's dormant for a while and it picks back up later with different objectives. This allows people to grow independently and learn from new mentors.

Unfortunately, sometimes the mentor and mentee are not on the same wavelength and one party wants out. This is okay, and the best thing is to separate the mentor-mentee relationship while keeping the personal relationship, or it's possible someone's feelings could get hurt. Your mentor may tell you that he or she no longer has the time or energy. Whatever their reason, it's best to respect their desires and thank them for their time and energy with you. It may be nothing personal; their family life could be requiring more of their attention.

If you are the one who no longer wants to be mentored by this individual, then you may have to address this. Sometimes, schedules just don't line up and circumstances take care of this for you. The mentor may already sense this, and the mentoring relationship will fade and there is no harm done. If not, then you may have to let them know your intent. Get clear on your reasons and express them as clearly and respectfully as possible. Maybe you have changed your objectives, or logistically it's just not working out. However, there may be many other reasons that are harder to express: you may feel they are not helping you and it's a waste of your time, or they are getting too controlling, or you have different values, or they don't have integrity. There could be any number of reasons that are more difficult to express. Rule of thumb: it's always best to be as honest as you can while still respecting them and honoring the time they have spent with you. A more mature person will understand. However, if you think you need some help figuring out how to tell your mentor that you want out, this may be a good topic to discuss with another trusted advisor.

Ideally, intergenerational mentoring relationships can serve as some of the most powerful relationships to sustain organizations, entire trades, and communities. The younger person benefits from the tacit knowledge passed along by the elder, while the elder can be energized by young people with fresh ideas. It is a gift to be mentored and there is also a gift to be able to mentor those in the next generation. Pass the gift along and remember to invest in the next generation after you.

\*There are instances in certain highly structured work environments where you may seek specific mentoring in how to succeed in a particular field where the objectives and measures of success have already been prescribed by the culture.

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[i] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mentor>

[ii] Levinson, D. (1978). *The Season's of a Man's Life*. Ballantine Books, New York.