



8 Tips for an Amazing Mentor Relationship

Many successful people attribute at least part of their success to having a mentor. The right mentor can provide advice and connections that help their mentee reach heights that would be impossible alone. Here are some pieces of advice on mentorship, with perspectives from successful tech professionals who have seen its benefits firsthand.

1. Mentorship requires intentional investments of time and energy; you get what you put in.

Being a mentee is not a passive role. When you have a mentor, it's your job to define your own goals, cultivate the relationship, seek out advice, attend meetings or events you're invited to, and so on.

"Building a strong network of mentors requires commitment of time and energy, but with these types of relationships, you absolutely get out of them what you put in," says Andrew Rubin, cofounder & CEO of Illumio. "The more you know yourself, what you are good at, what you are not, the more value you and your mentors will get out of the relationship. Then make time to invest in those relationships."

Says Brett Caine, CEO of Urban Airship, "Mentor relationships must be tended to and are constantly evolving. Those experiences and discussions culminate in a stronger bond to navigate more complex life or business discussions in the future."

2. Experienced perspectives are invaluable for young careers and companies.

While mentorship can be valuable at any stage of a career, it's especially important when the mentee doesn't have as much personal experience in the industry. With a mentor, they can benefit from the insights gained through years of experience--without having to spend years of trial and error themselves.

"When I first started my career, I discounted the importance of experience," says Mark Schulze, cofounder of Clover & VP of Business Development at First Data. "A strong mentor has the experience to help a startup avoid the pitfalls and identify possibly paths to success. Often entrepreneurs feel like there isn't time, but the time and trouble you can save by working with a good mentor is invaluable."

Vivek Ravisankar, cofounder and CEO of HackerRank, still experiences this firsthand in his career. "As a first-time founder, I look to people who have lived through the experiences and challenges that I face every day in building and scaling my company. I've found it invaluable to have a board of advisors who have experience scaling companies and can provide valuable, actionable advice."

3. The best mentors are the ones who can fill gaps in your skillset. Don't seek a mentor who's your clone.

Every entrepreneur has their own strengths and weaknesses. And while mentors can certainly help make the strengths even stronger, it's usually even more valuable to have someone who can give advice in areas where you're struggling.

"Entrepreneurship is essentially about constantly learning, and having great mentors is crucial to learning fast," says Jyoti Bansal, founder and CEO of BIG Labs. "In particular, it's important for a mentor to supplement the strengths that the entrepreneur brings to the table. For example--I came to the game as a strong technologist, but had to learn about the science of enterprise sales, finance/operations, etc. An entrepreneur should always select a mentor that fills the gaps in their experience and skill set."

4. You don't always have to follow a mentor's advice--but listen to it and evaluate it.

One important thing to understand about mentorship is that the mentor can't live your life for you. They're there to provide advice and perspective and make you think differently--not make unilateral decisions for you. "Counsel need not always be followed, but should always be carefully considered," advises Caine.

"The role of the mentor is to make you reflect, not to give you advice or answers. Helping you ask the right questions--that's real mentorship," explains Marten Mickos, CEO of HackerOne.

5. Anyone can be a mentor--even without knowing it.

If you go through life with the perspective that you have something to learn from everyone you meet, you'll collect a lot of informal mentors along the way.

"In my own life and career, I have had numerous mentors, most of them accidental, and many of them unaware that I saw them as mentors," says Mickos. "At one point I decided that any person I meet will be treated by me as a mentor for the time the interaction lasts. In an Uber or Lyft, the driver can be my mentor for a few minutes. Among friends, I seek out mentorship moments. I even have fantasy mentors, i.e. I envision myself being mentored by someone I admire (for instance, Winston Churchill) and I try to figure out what questions that mentor would ask me. It works!"

6. Diversity of mentorship is important.

It's common to have one person you regard as a primary mentor, but that doesn't mean you can't seek out a variety of perspectives on a more informal basis as well.

Susan Liu, Principal at Scale Venture Partners, says, "At Scale Venture Partners, half of our investing partners are women and all of the men are naturalized citizens. Having such a diverse set of mentors has helped me realize that there isn't a cookie-cutter for success in VC, or any industry for that matter. This gives me confidence in my own career path, and has helped shape the way I think about investing and entrepreneurship."

Rubin also encourages seeking out mentors who bring other perspectives to light: "I always encourage people to find mentors who you not only trust to be sources of counsel throughout your career, but also who bring a different point of view to your own."

7. There are specific things you can do to being a good mentee.

Often, people consider the "burden" of mentorship to be on the mentor. But mentees can take responsibility for cultivating the experience of mentorship too.

"The biggest difference between people having a successful mentor relationship boils down to initiative," says Tyler Perry, partner at Bateman Group: "Many thoughtful pieces have been written about how to be a good mentor, but there is less attention on how to be a good mentee. When I look at those that I have mentored and those that are getting a lot out of the program have some clear similarities:

- They thoughtfully select the right person.
- They establish the framework of the relationship.
- They work at the relationship.
- They are prepared with specific questions, areas for feedback, and requests for support."

8. Mentorship is beneficial for the mentors too.

Finally, just as the responsibilities of mentorship are shared by mentees, the benefits are shared by mentors.

"The most successful mentorships are the ones that are a two-way experience where both sides benefit from the relationship," says Caine. "In these relationships, the mentor experiences satisfaction and new perspectives by providing guidance and insight to the person seeking advice, while the mentee gains the benefit of experienced advice."

"We tend to think that mentorship was designed to help the mentees, the up-and-coming. But mentorship helps the mentor too," adds Mickos. "To be a mentor makes you a more understanding human being. It keeps your mind young and your skills fresh. Successful people who don't start to mentor others will over time lose touch with their own excellence. Mentoring someone connects you back to the original you who became so excellent."

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