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MANAGING YOURSELF

Demystifying Mentoring

by Amy Gallo

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When people think of mentoring, they often think of an older executive counseling a young upstart. The senior leader advises the junior employee on his career, how to navigate the world of work, and what he needs to do to get ahead. But mentoring has changed a lot in the last few decades. Just as the notion of a 50-year linear career with a single company or in one industry is outdated, so is the idea that career advice must come from a wise old sage. The traditional mentor-mentee relationship is not necessarily a thing of the past, but it's no longer the standard. Now, there are many ways to get the information and guidance you need.

What the Experts Say

While the concept of mentoring has changed, the need for career counseling has not. In fact, because most careers take numerous twists and turns in today's world, it's required more than ever. "When I first started studying mentoring in the 1970s it was a much more stable world. There is a lot of chaos in the world of work," says Kathy E. Kram, the Shipley Professor in Management at the Boston University School of Management and author of *Mentoring at Work*. While mentoring has morphed, our collective thinking on it has not and many held-over myths still prevail. "There are many ways to define mentoring," says Jeanne Meister, a Founding Partner of Future Workplace and co-author of *The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop & Keep Tomorrow's Employees Today*. If you are working with the old definition, you may be confused about how to get the advice you need. Below are four myths: knowing the truth about them can help you figure out who to turn to and how.

Myth #1: You have to find one perfect mentor

It's actually quite rare these days that people get through their career with only one mentor. In fact, many people have several advisors they turn to. "In all likelihood, you'd benefit from having more than one developer," says Kram, who prefers the term "developmental network" to mentor. "It's that handful of people who you can go to for advice and who you trust to have your best interests in mind," she explains. This network can be as large or small as you want, and it may even include your spouse or partner. Sometimes it can be helpful to get a variety of perspectives on an issue you are facing. Meister and her co-author Karie Willyerd agree with Kram. "It's not uncommon for people to have many, many mentors," says Willyerd, former CLO of Sun Microsystems and co-founder of Future Workplace.

Myth #2: Mentoring is a formal long-term relationship

Because the world moves fast and people change jobs and careers more often, a long-term advising relationship may be unrealistic and unnecessary. "Mentoring can be a one-hour mentoring session. We don't have to escalate it to a six-month or year-long event," says Willyerd. Instead of focusing on the long term, think of mentoring as something you access when you need it. "It may not be big agenda items that you're grappling with. You don't need to wait until you have some big thing in your career," says Meister. In today's world, she says, mentoring is "more like Twitter and less like having a psychotherapy session."

Of course, the advice and guidance may be richer and more relevant if it comes from someone who knows you well and understands your goals. You still need to build relationships so that when you require advice, you have the connections in place. However, there may be times when you look to people who don't know you as well or at all to get one-off counsel from an outsider's perspective. And in these cases, Willyerd suggests you may want to avoid using the word "mentor" altogether. "You can simply say, 'I'd really like to get your advice on something'," she says.

Myth #3: Mentoring is for junior people

Many people assume that they only need a mentor when they are first starting out in their careers. "We used to think it was people at early stages of their career who needed mentoring, those just out of MBA programs. Now we understand that people at every stage benefit from this kind of assistance," says Kram. In their book, *The 2020 Workplace*, Meister and Willyerd talk about reverse mentoring in which a more junior person advises a senior person on things like new technology.

The reality is “There are lots of points in a corporate career when you need a mentor,” says Meister. Though you shouldn’t wait for them to come up, transitions are a particularly good time to seek out a mentor. Whether you are making a career change, taking on a new role, or contemplating leaving a job, advice from someone who has done it before can be helpful. “You may need a mentor when the environment around you is changing rapidly and you haven’t had a chance to keep up with the changes,” says Meister. “Or as you try to navigate the complexities of your organization,” adds Willyerd.

Myth #4: Mentoring is something more experienced people do out of the goodness of their hearts

“It can be an honor to ask someone to be a mentor,” says Willyerd. But the respect isn’t the only reason people agree to help. Mentoring should be useful to both parties involved. Before seeking out a mentor, think about what you have to offer him. Can you provide a unique perspective on the organization or his role? Do you bring valuable outside information that might help him be successful in his job? Whatever it is, be sure that you are clear with your prospective advisor about what’s in it for him. This does not have to be a direct barter. Even the promise of future help, if and when it’s needed, can be enough to convince a mentor to give up his time and energy.

So, do you need mentoring?

Now that you have a better understanding of what mentoring can be, do you need it? “The place to start is with self-assessment and find out what are the challenges in front of you right now and why. Then ask yourself, do you have the relational resources to handle those challenges?” says Kram. If the answer is no, it may be time to seek out a mentor or several. Remember that mentoring can take many shapes and forms — the key is to find the right kind of advice from the right person at the right time.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Build a cadre of people you can turn to for advice when you need it
- Nurture relationships with people whose perspectives you respect
- Think of mentoring as both a long-term and short-term arrangement

Don’t:

- Assume that because you are successful or experienced in your field that you don’t need a mentor
- Rely on one person to help guide you in your career
- Expect to receive mentoring without providing anything in return

Case Study #1: Using multiple mentors

In January 2000, Soki Choi left Accenture Sweden to start her own company developing applications for mobile phones. A mere four years later, the company was acquired and Soki was left with a large decision about what to do next. Should she take a job with another Swedish telecom company? Should she start another business? “Suddenly I didn’t have a natural “next step” in my career,” she explains. Since she was a child, she had dreamed of doing medical research, but felt it was too late in life to pursue that path, especially without an MD. However, the desire nagged her. One day that spring, she read a story about Sweden’s prestigious research hospital, the Karolinska Institute, merging with the university hospital in Huddinge and decided she had to explore the possibility of a medical PhD. She wanted multiple perspectives on this potential career change, so she sought the advice of three different people.

Her first thought was of Ewa Ställdal, the CEO of a major medical research foundation that she had met several years previously on a delegation trip to the US with the Swedish Ministry of Industry. “She listened and took my thoughts seriously. She then connected me to her research and medical network, and in particular to an entrepreneurial professor in medical management,” she says.

Soki also contacted Bjorn Svedberg, the former CEO of Ericsson. She first met Bjorn in her role as a board member of PTS, the National Post & Telecom Agency which advises the Swedish government on telecom and infrastructure planning. Soki respected him and wanted to know what he thought of this potential career shift. “I specifically asked him if he thought it was a good idea to take on PhD studies in the midst of a critical time of my professional career,” she says. Bjorn, who was in his 80s, revealed to Soki that he wished he had done what she was considering and he strongly urged her to pursue her dream.

Soki's third advisor was Martin Lorentzon. Martin is only 5 years older than Soki and had a similar career trajectory in that he also left a steady job to start his own company. He had served as a "go-to" person for Soki while she was building her business. "Martin was much more of a direct, operational, and continuous mentor," she said. He also encouraged her to do what she thought would make her most happy.

Soki is about to complete her PhD at the Karolinska Institute. Without the advice and help of her mentors, Soki thinks she would've taken one of the many job offers she had in 2004 and would still be in the telecom field, rather than pursuing her dream.

Case Study #2: When you think you don't need it

After twenty years in the search business, Stephen Wachter founded his own recruiting firm, Osprey One. Two years ago, he felt he was on top of his game: he had some of the largest clients in Silicon Valley, including Google, Yahoo, and Facebook. On a plane headed to the East Coast, he sat next to Susan Robertson, a leadership development consultant. He immediately noticed her because, as he says, they both had "devices falling out of their pockets." They started talking about what they did. Stephen proudly shared his successes, to which Susan asked him, "So, what's your next step?" The question blew Stephen away — he didn't know there was anyplace else to go. He thought he had reached the top of his career ladder and simply had to keep doing what he was doing. "She was very good at getting me to explore my own story," he says of Susan. Talking to her, he realized that there was a next level: both in how he conducted his business and how he interacted with his clients. "I thought about times when I had friction points with my clients and how I would've handled those situations differently in retrospect," he says. Besides, if he stopped developing, the industry would grow without him. "You've got to be part of the newness or the newness will pass you," he explains. Susan and he agreed to be in touch and talk about how Susan could help him stay focused on growing and learning. They continue to have a mentoring relationship today. She has helped him to reflect on who he is and how he is with others. "When you're young, you need someone to show you the ropes. The danger is when you think you've got it figured out."

Case Study #3: Getting help through a transition

As the Managing Director of People Insights, a coaching and consulting firm based in Belgium, Sunita Malhotra helps global companies design and implement mentoring programs. "The only reason I can do that is because of my experience with being mentored," she says. Midway in her

career, she took a job working in HR for a fast moving consumer goods company. She had already held several positions in both consulting and sales and marketing, so she wasn't a junior upstart. However, HR was new to her and she knew she was going to need support through the transition. As she saw it, she would need help with three specific things: understanding how HR worked, figuring out how to work in a European office of a global company, and navigating being a women in a male-dominated company.

Sunita looked both inside and outside the company for potential mentors. She asked around and several people recommended a male leader who was the second in command in HR. She approached him and asked if he would support her. "I was pretty direct. I knew he was busy. I was new. I prepared the conversation well." After listening to her request, he agreed. The two met regularly discussing what Sunita was learning but he also shared his experiences, both successes and failures. "He was a very good developer of people," she says. Sunita has since had several other mentors and believes the guidance she's gotten has shaped her career. "If you want a mentor, and one hasn't been allocated to you, do your homework. Know what you want. Know what you don't want," she advises.

This content was adapted for inclusion in the *HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need*.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.

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