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On Mentorships: *Roles & Relationship*

A survey conducted by Olivet University shows that 76% of respondents believe that having a mentor is important for their career development. Yet, only 37% actually have one!

Ask any successful person how they got to where they are today, and they will probably tell you they attribute at least part of their success to a mentor. Look at Bill Gates, who acknowledges Warren Buffet as his trusted guide. For Oprah, it was Maya Angelou. Baseball Hall of Famer Cal Ripken, Jr. looked to his father as a great mentor. And then there's Danny LaRusso, who turned his life around under the tutelage of Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*.

Whether you're looking to progress in your company, career, or industry, you're starting your own business, or you've just landed your first full-time job fresh out of college, you need a mentor. After all, navigating your career can be challenging. At times, you just need someone to help guide your way. Everybody does!

What is a mentorship?

Formally defined, a mentorship is a professional relationship in which an experienced person (mentor) assists the mentoree (also known as a mentee) in developing specific skills and knowledge to enhance professional growth.

To find, build, and nurture a successful mentorship, it's important to understand your role as the "student"; your mentor's role as the "teacher"; and how the mentor-mentoree relationship works.

Here's a closer look at these roles and the relationship:

- ***The Student:***

Your first assignment as a mentoree is to figure out what you need to learn from your mentor. Start by clarifying your professional goals. Then determine the areas you need help with and — perhaps most importantly — be ready to articulate your career goals and needs clearly to others.



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If you're struggling to identify your goals, ask yourself these questions:

- Where do I want to be in two years? In five years?
- What technical and soft skills do I need or want to develop or enhance to achieve my career goals?
- What knowledge do I need or want to acquire (about jobs, career paths, the business, an industry, etc.)?
- In which aspects of my career would I benefit most from a mentor?

With your goals in mind, put pencil to paper and make a list of potential mentors who may be able to help you. Ideally, the people you identify should have already reached similar career goals to your own and / or they possess the knowledge, skills, and strengths you want to develop.

That being said, don't assume that the person with the most professional experience will be the best mentor for you. Look for role models who will provide honest feedback and encourage you to stretch beyond your comfort zone. Often, the best mentors are those who already know how you think, how you act, how you communicate — *and, ideally, they have seen you demonstrate your potential.*

If the company you work for has a mentoring program, that's a great place to start your mentor search. Even if there isn't a formal program, think about your current and former co-workers in your organization. Is there someone who would be a good mentor for you? If so, they might just turn out to be the perfect teacher because of their knowledge of the company, its culture, and norms.

Also think about people outside your organization. Is there someone in your professional network, a social group, or a volunteer organization you belong to that might be a fit? What about the people outside of your professional circles?

If you're in college now, consider the managers you've met throughout your internship, clinical, or practicum experiences. And tap into your alma mater's alumni network.

Once you've created your list of potential mentors, reach out to one of them to explore the possibility of establishing a mentorship. Clearly articulate your career goals and the type of guidance you're seeking. Express your commitment and willingness to consider your mentor's advice, guidance, and recommendations and to do the work necessary to achieve your goals.



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- ***The Teacher***

Your mentor's role is to support you in navigating the challenges (and successes) of the workplace by providing tactical and strategic input regarding your career goals and action plans. Think of your mentor as your "career Sensei". Through teaching, guidance and constructive feedback — and some reality checks — a good mentor can help you:

- assess and refine your career goals,
- increase your confidence in your ability to do your job well,
- prepare for promotional opportunities, and
- build your professional network.

- ***The Relationship***

Most mentor-mentoree relationships tend to be flexible, informal relationships. But don't mistake "informal" to mean the relationship should be taken lightly. On the contrary, just like any relationship, **successful mentorships take work.**

Strong relationships are built on a foundation of trust. So, both of you need to be honest and open with one another. It's a good idea to establish the framework for the mentorship up front. Define the roles and boundaries. What are the expectations? What's the best way to communicate? How often?

In order for the mentorship to succeed, you must be willing to "*be the student*".

- Take an active role in your own development. Be ready for your meetings. Prepare your questions and specific requests for support.
- Be open to and *invite* constructive feedback. Reflect upon the advice and guidance your mentor offers.
- When you make a commitment to do something, keep it.
- And *do the work* necessary to achieve your goals!

Last, but not least, remember that the best relationships are mutually-beneficial. So, give back to the mentorship; ask what you can do to for your mentor.



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The Student Becomes the Teacher

Think about it. It's highly likely that your mentors were once mentees themselves! So, as you advance in your career, perhaps the best way to honor those who helped you is to pay it forward by mentoring others.

Just hours after Maya Angelo's passing, Oprah Winfrey said of her beloved mentor, "She was a teacher. 'When you learn, teach. When you get, give.' is one of my best lessons from her." As a mentor to many herself, Oprah is living proof that *the student becomes the teacher*.