

“Learn from the mistakes of others. You can’t live long enough to make them all yourself.”
Eleanor Roosevelt

The word ‘mentor’ means an advisor, usually an older and more experienced guide who teaches and protects a younger, less experienced protégé or mentee. Mentoring is a relationship in which talent is nurtured, potential skills are honed and both parties - the mentor and the protégé - learn.

Here are a few steps to finding and approaching an unpaid or volunteering mentor.

1. Find your hero.

The first step is to find your heroes. Who inspires you? Who do you look up to, and why? They can be from inside your own profession, but don’t be afraid to look outside as well. Is there someone who has grown their business in a way that you emulate, or has led their life in a way that you would like to follow?

Here are a few questions to ask yourself if you are stuck:

- Who could add value to my career?
- Who could help me with networking?
- How did my colleagues find their mentors?
- What did it feel like the last time I had someone who invested in my growth and who helped me figure things out?

Mentors do not have to be from the same industry, gender or generation. Open your mind to new possibilities by working outside of your comfort zone.

2. Learn more about them.

Once you’ve found your hero, learn everything you can. Finding a mentor can happen serendipitously – but you must help to create the opportunity, and the more you know, the better.

A few things you will need to know:

- What is your point of access? Do you have a way of getting in touch with this person? How are you going to meet, and how often? If they are in a different city or country from you, this is going to be difficult to achieve.
- Have they mentored before? Research shows that people who have mentored before are more likely to do so again.
- Have they been mentored? Again, research suggests that people who have been mentored in the past are much more likely to mentor someone in the future.
- Have they worked as teachers, tutors, guides or coaches in the past? These professions attract people who are natural mentors.
- Does this person have any formal mentoring training or qualifications?

3. Figure out what you want.

Once you've found your potential mentor, and figured out if they are the right person for you, work out what you want. Entering into a mentoring relationship without a clear idea of what you'd like to achieve as a result is going to mean a lot of time wasted for both you and your mentor.

- How often would you like to meet?
- How will those meetings be structured?
- Are you working towards a particular set of goals? How can your mentor help you?
- Are you looking for informal advice and coaching around challenges in your professional life?
- Are you looking for someone to show the way and hold your hand through the tough times?

Whatever you are looking for, always remember that your mentor is not your fairy godmother, nor are they the genie inside the lamp. They are not there to make your dreams come true, or grant you three wishes. Your mentor's job is to provide you with guidance and support, but under no circumstances should you expect them to solve your problems. You will need to demonstrate that you are proactive, confident, and an attractive prospect as a protégé. If you demonstrate neediness, you will only attract the kind of mentor who would want to take advantage of that.

4. Find a way to make the connection before you ask.

Sheryl Sandberg, in her book *Lean In*, likens asking strangers to be mentors to the behaviour of the main character in the favourite children's book *Are You My Mother?* Asking a stranger, "Will you be my mentor?" is just like the baby bird in the book asking every passing creature "Are you my Mother?". The answer is very likely to be NO!

Don't ask for mentorship, but follow the work of your hero, and be helpful and supportive where you can. Ask how you can be helpful. Tweet out their posts, comment in a positive way on their blogs, share their updates, start a discussion on LinkedIn drawing on their post, refer new clients or business to them, and the list goes on. In short, offer your unique voice, perspectives, experiences and resources to further the action and conversation that these influencers have sparked. Understand that you are able to be of service to them, and go out and do it.

5. Figure out What's In It For Them (WIIFT).

The Golden Rule of mentoring is figuring out what's in it for the mentor. What will they gain from a relationship with you? As soon as you understand this, your journey towards finding the right mentor for you will be easier. If you're not sure, put yourself in their shoes. If the tables were turned, what would you want to see from this individual asking for help? If you were inundated with requests for help every day, what type of person would YOU choose to assist, and why? Is it altruism? Charity? Do you have skills that can be shared, or a reputation that the mentor could gain from by helping you?

The mentor-protégé relationship represents two-sides of the same coin - the unwritten rule in mentorship. Make it a point to create opportunities for your mentor. They can also use your help, regardless of their success. Get to know their business and their goals more closely. Listen and take note of their needs. Be selfless - a good mentor appreciates it when you can reciprocate.

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