

# 6 Steps To An Epic Mentor Relationship That May Change Your Life

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Mentor relationships are not immune to the laws of human interactions. They require judicious and consistent nurturing to be sustained. Without active management on the part of the protégé, the meetings with their mentor will become less frequent and less impactful, ultimately accelerating the end of the relationship.

In my exchanges with my friend and mentor, Bob Wood, we engage in a number of activities which keep our time together both fun and productive.

These endeavors have arisen organically, as we have identified our shared interests. However, rather than leave your mentor relationship to chance, you should proactively initiate activities that will strengthen your communications with your mentor.

## Stages Of A Mentor Relationship

In my typically layman fashion, I have identified the following non-academic stages of a mentoring relationship.

1. *Setting the ground rules*
2. *Keeping it fun*
3. *Making it a two-way street*
4. *Ending on a high note*

At the outset of a mentorship, it is appropriate for the mentor to take the lead in defining the ground rules. Once sufficient rapport is established, the ongoing management of the relationship is the junior partner's responsibility.

## KEEPING IT FUN

There are a number of entertaining ways in which you can maintain the health and vigor of your mentorships.

1. *Be Active* - Identify an activity you and your mentor both enjoy. Grabbing a cup of coffee or sharing a meal is fine, but over time such interactions wear thin. In my case, I cycle with Bob. This allows us to exercise in a forum that also fosters lively conversations.

Fortunately my mentor and I both like biking. However, there may be times when you are forced to take up a new endeavor to cement a mentor relationship. For instance, a friend of mine found it difficult, as a young engineer, to establish a relationship with his company's CTO. The CTO's calendar was booked solid, except for lunch, which he spent running.

My friend, who was not a runner at the time, summoned the courage to ask the CTO if he could run with him. This request was daunting because the CTO had participated in dozens of marathons and took his mid-day running seriously.

It was initially brutal for my friend, who struggled for weeks to keep up with the CTO, yet his efforts paid off. Not only did he get in great shape and become the CTO's protégé, he established a life-long friendship that has spanned nearly 20-years.

2. *Be Thankful* – As with any healthy relationship, never take your mentor for granted. Whenever your mentor assists you in a material way, show your gratitude. Saying “Thank You” is not just polite, it's good business. Verbal thanks are generally sufficient. However, in some instances, a small gift is appropriate.

Research shows that presents which are most highly valued are: (i) significant (but not expensive), (ii) unexpected, (iii) show an intimate knowledge of the recipient's passions, and (iv) are given unconditionally, without the expectation of reciprocity. Good mentors are in demand and they will quickly lose patience if you do not adequately appreciate their time and attention.

3. *Be Sharing* – Mentors are often motivated by the satisfaction they derive from vicariously sharing in your success. Thus, freely communicate your accomplishments and give your mentor credit, when it's due.

In a healthy mentor / mentee relationship, such sharing (within reason) will not be off putting. If you cannot comfortably convey your accomplishments with your mentor without wondering how they will react, focus on enhancing the trust underlying your relationship.

4. *Be Relevant* – Avoid random outreach to your mentor. Be sure that when you do solicit their attention, it is not gratuitous and has a specific purpose which is clearly communicated.

5. *Be Responsive* – Your mentor's time is valuable; cherish it. Do not force them contact you multiple times for a response to an inquiry. Always reply in some fashion within 24-hours, even if it is simply a brief note explaining that you will respond more thoughtfully when you have adequate time.

6. *Be (The Real) You* - Mentees (especially young protégés) are sometimes fearful of exposing their vulnerabilities and failings to their mentor. Ironically, it is a willingness to convey your weaknesses that often elevates a mentorship into a deep and lasting friendship. You may never reach peer status with your mentor, but you can be their friend.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson wisely said, “It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.” That said, you should obviously avoid outright “stupidity” in the company of your mentor (trust me, don't do Tequila shots with them). However, if you have a sound rapport, your relationship will be strengthened when you share your fears, challenges and concerns.

Like any friendship, one based on a false foundation is doomed to end prematurely. If authenticity jeopardizes your relationship with your mentor, find a new one. In such cases, mom's advice holds true, “If they don't like you for who you are, they probably weren't your friend (or a worthwhile mentor) in the first place.”