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Title: What’s the Right Way to Find a Mentor?

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Summary. Mentorship can be life changing. Staying in the driver’s seat and being proactive about your relationship with your mentor is key to its success. These simple principles will help develop strong mentoring relationships,...more

In the summer of 2004, I was 18 years old, preparing for my first year of college and looking for ways to fund my education. I was working double shifts at KFC and late nights at Hollywood Video, and yet, one day, I found myself at a gas station without enough money to fill up my tank.

I made a promise to myself to do whatever it would take to never be in this situation again: one where I was living from paycheck to paycheck, working multiple jobs, and couch surfing to save money on rent. Working harder — in my case, 12-hour days — wasn’t getting me anywhere, but I knew that working smarter could. As the child of refugee parents from Vietnam, I didn’t have anyone at home who understood how to navigate the American school system or workforce. I knew I needed help, someone to guide me.

A good mentor can make a huge imprint on your life, and it is thanks to not one, but many, that I was able to grow from that woman stuck at the gas station into who I am now. I turned to my former high school teacher, a person I could trust, who advocated for my education and gave me advice that prepared me to succeed in college. Once I graduated, I started an IT internship where I met a mentor who, six years later, helped me land a job in tech. Today, I’m a global technology program manager for one of the world’s largest firms, and founder of Thriving Elements, a nonprofit mentoring program for underserved, underrepresented girls around the globe.

My work has taught me some valuable lessons, but perhaps the most important is that no matter what stage you’re at, it’s worth learning how to make an ask, nurture, and maintain these kinds of relationships. Fostered correctly, they can put you in the driver’s seat of your career, empower you to explore options that were previously unimaginable, give you access to untapped opportunities, and teach you how to navigate the challenges you never saw coming.

Here are a few tips on how you can find mentors, and maintain and nurture those relationships.

Ask for that first meeting.

Seventy-six percent of people say that mentors are important, but only 37% actually have one. Why the gap? In my experience, it’s because most people are afraid to ask for that initial meeting. The fear of rejection is real and it’s even more amplified during this pandemic.

Reaching out to someone you admire, but who you may not know so well — especially if that person is more senior than you — is a little more intimidating than it was when you could casually walk by their desk, bump into them in the hallway, or chat in-person during a networking event.

To take some pressure off of yourself and ease the fear, remind yourself that the people you admire have likely had various mentors throughout their lives who have helped them to get to where they are today, and would jump at the opportunity to help others in the same way. If you want to connect with them, start with a simple ask: a quick 15 to 30 minute virtual coffee break.

The best way to reach out is usually sending a short email. Share one or two things you admire about their work, then tell them a little about yourself, why you’re reaching out, what you would like to learn from them, and wrap it up with your ask:

Dear X,

I’ve been reading about the work you’re doing with Y. I’m interested in building my career in technology and I’d love to hear how you rose from a systems analyst to a technical product manager in five years. Would it be possible for us to have a quick video chat sometime within the next couple of weeks?

A first meeting over coffee, or a short video call, is low commitment for your target mentor and will give you an opportunity to better understand them, gauge your chemistry, and see if they’d be the right fit for you.

Nurture the relationship.

The number one recommendation I’ve heard from both the mentors and the mentees I’ve worked with over the years is: Take the time to really connect with the other person.

Get to know them: Think of your first coffee meeting or virtual call as an opportunity for casual conversation. Remember that you’re both still feeling each other out, so don’t just focus the discussion on work. Ask your potential mentor what they like to do on the weekends, what books they like to read, or what hobbies they’re interested in. Most people will be thrilled to take a break from their hectic workdays and connect on a personal level. This kind of conversation also gives you both a chance to see if you have anything in common, and whether or not you enjoy one another’s company.

Towards the middle of the first meeting, it’s appropriate to bring up career questions you have for them and talk about the areas in which you’d like to grow. As you wrap up the call, summarize the advice they’ve provided to show that you value their input. For instance you might say, “It sounds like attending networking events really helped you advance your career. I’ll look into some virtual meetups that I can use to connect with other people in my field. Thanks for that suggestion.”

Send a thank you note: After your meeting, follow up with a thank you email sometime within the same week. In your message, share a few key things you learned during the conversation, and let them know you’d like to follow up in a few weeks:

Dear X,

I loved learning about your hike in Vietnam and all the wonderful food you tried along the way. I think I might go to the Vietnamese restaurant nearby and give the cuisine a try. I was also surprised to hear that you taught yourself how to code through online courses. That is so inspiring! If it’s okay with you, I’ll touch base in a few weeks.

Most people in a position to mentor are busy, so don’t be alarmed if it takes them a few days to respond.

Follow up: Three to five weeks after sending the thank you message, follow up to let your potential mentor know what you did based on your discussions in that first meeting. (Did you read the book they recommended, or watch a TED talk they seemed to have loved?) Then, ask if they would be willing to meet up again within the next couple of weeks. I don’t recommend sending an agenda. Rather, try to keep your tone and suggestions casual. In my experience, good leaders and mentors appreciate a more informal setting. The point is to create an atmosphere that’s enjoyable for both of you — not schedule yet another work meeting. That said, it can be helpful to note down things that you’d like to discuss and share them in your email when reaching out:

Dear X,

I finally got down to reading that book and I have to say, I can’t believe I didn’t read it sooner. What a great story of grit and determination. Thank you for recommending it.

I was planning to take a course in creative writing from Y institute. Are you familiar with it? Maybe we can discuss during our next catch up? I know you’re very busy, but let me know if you’d have time to meet up in the next couple of weeks. I’d really appreciate it.

Usually after three to four meetings, you’ll have a good sense of whether you’d like the person to be your mentor, at which point you can say something like, “These meetings have been very helpful to me; it’s almost like you’re my mentor!” Then pause and see their reaction.

If they reciprocate with a yes, that’s good news for you. If they smile but don’t respond directly, that’s okay too. It’s likely because they don’t want to formally commit to mentorship right now. But don’t be discouraged. As long as they’re making time to meet with you and you’re getting the guidance you need, there’s really no need for a label.

Maintain the relationship.

When you ask someone to be your mentor, you are also asking them to invest their time in you. Show them that their time is being well-used by demonstrating a return on their investment (ROI).

Keep them updated: As a mentor myself, I can say there’s nothing more rewarding than seeing that the time I’ve invested in a mentee was valuable and helped them advance towards their goals. But it’s a mentee’s job to help the mentor see just how they’ve done so. Remember that first follow up email you sent? Make that a regular thing. Use the time between your catchups to take action on the goals you set with your mentor. Send them updates (a simple text or an email) telling them how their guidance is playing an important role in your career and personal development. But be sure not to spam them. About once every month or two is good during the first year, and as time progresses and you’ve established a good mentoring relationship, pinging your mentor even once a quarter is okay. The goal is to keep in touch and to keep them informed about how your career is progressing.

Offer to help: As with any relationship, mentoring relationships are a two-way street. What you’re giving back to your mentor is really your progress, but there’s also no harm in checking in with your mentor during your meetings to see if you can help them in any way. Maybe they’re working on a presentation and could use an outside perspective, or perhaps you know someone they were looking to connect with.

Express gratitude: Write a thank you note after each meeting. While it doesn’t need to be as extensive as your first thank you note, a quick, “Thanks again for your time, was great to catch up!” will show them that you appreciate the time and guidance they are giving to you.

Mentorship can be life-changing. I’m proof of that. Staying in the driver’s seat and being proactive will make your relationship with your mentor a successful one. Use these principles to guide you towards a future you’ve imagined for yourself.