

# The Art of Mentoring and Being Mentored



because we are all always both

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Hi. My name is Jess Unrein and today we're going to talk about the process of cultivating mentorships for both mentors and mentees.

First, a little about my background. I'm a career changer. My formal training is in political science and music. I worked in nonprofit administration for a while after college before deciding that that wouldn't work for me. I decided to learn how to code after some people I followed on Twitter tweeted out resources for adults to learn how to code from the ground up. I decided that it had to be better than what I was doing, so I moved from Denver to Chicago to attend Dev Bootcamp in 2014.

I got a job in Python shortly thereafter and I've been working in Python ever since. I'm now at Sprout Social. I've been there about a year. I'm also a somewhat lapsed organizer for Chicago PyLadies. My first conference talk was actually here last year at PyOhio. Since I've gone on to speak at conferences around the country (but mostly in Chicago) about women in tech, Python, and community engagement. My ability to do this started with PyOhio and some of the wonderful mentors we have here in the midwest Python community.

# Why Give This Talk?

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So, what qualifications do I have to give this talk, really? I've only been in the industry for about three years. On the surface that hardly seems like enough time to have developed a lot of experience with the topic of mentorship. Or, at least, not the way that I've heard a lot of people talk about mentorship in the dev community. "Get yourself a mentor" is the advice I see given to a lot of new coders, as if it's just that easy. And while I think that piece of advice is completely correct, it also borders on useless with how vague and impossible it can seem when looking in from the outside.

But mentorship is something that is near and dear to my heart. I was able to change careers and enter a totally new industry in large part thanks to the mentoring and coaching I recieved from people along the way. And I think honestly that many of the people to whom I owe my success have no idea how instrumental they are in my process for learning new things and being able to do things like leave an unsatisfying job, contribute to open source, do community organizing work, or speak at conferences.

# Who needs a mentor?

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Honestly, I would argue that just about everyone needs a mentor no matter what stage they're at in their career. What these mentorships ultimately look like is going to vary quite a bit from person to person based on your level of experience, the support you get from structures at your job and in your social life, and what your ultimate goals are. But mentors are part of the essential landscape that help you get to where you would like to be.

# What is a mentor then?

Someone who helps give you an honest assesment of your capabilities, who will assist you within reason, and keep you accountable to your goals.

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Or, at least, this is my very subjective definition of what makes a healthy mentoring relationship.

Your mentor is not there for the purpose of inflating your ego or making you feel better. They're there to help you acheive your goals *by your request*.

# What is a mentorship not?

A mentor is not your partner and a mentor is not necessarily your sponsor.

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The same person in your life can occupy different roles, but the mentoring relationship is inherently unbalanced and should be voluntary. There shouldn't be an obligation on either part. Both parties should be receiving something from this relationship.

I think it's important to mention these two specific relationships as distinct from mentorship because these might be easy to conflate. A partner shares responsibility for a project or goal with you that a mentor should not. A mentor can't effectively be your partner in something because that strips them of the emotional distance necessary to perform their role.

A mentor is also not necessarily your sponsor. A sponsor is someone who advocates on your behalf. This could be at your job, recommending you for a keynote, or generally looking out for you. A mentor *might* also act as a sponsor for you, but having a healthy and mutually beneficial mentoring relationship *does not* create an obligation for your mentor to stick their neck out for you. Additionally, the same sort of skills gap is not necessarily present in a sponsorship as in a mentorship.

Mentorships are about skilling up others. It's a more private, internal process. Sponsorships are about access to power and influence, and about using that to increase the standing of someone else you believe in in that sphere where you wield influence. It's an external process. These two are not incompatible, but they should not be confused for one another.

As we all know from writing tests, the presence of the correct answer is not necessarily the same as the absence of the wrong answer, so I want to make sure we're all on the same page about what exactly a mentorship *is* before going further in the talk.



# What are my responsibilities as a mentee?

- Initiate conversation
- Have specific goals in mind
- Research appropriate mentors
- Ask questions appropriate to your mentor
- Be flexible about scheduling

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You are asking a lot of someone and their time. They are giving it to you for free. You have a responsibility to make sure that you are using this time in a way that is productive for both of you and can't be answered by a simple google search.

For example, if you are asking someone for help with job interviewing, you should have already looked up some basic interview questions and have a general idea of what to expect. You should be able to come to a mentor with specific, actionable asks. You should not rely on your mentor to come up with both questions and answers for you in conversation.

# Emotional Labor

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In essence, when you are asking a mentor for help, you are asking them to perform emotional labor for you.

What is emotional labor? It's when you ask someone to perform a task that's heavily based in managing your emotions and expectations to get something done. Teaching and mentoring is often a form of emotional labor because they're not just pointing you to an external resource and you're off on your way. They are engaging with you, face to face, with the knowledge that you might not like everything they have to say, and they have to manage that situation and your expectations as part of your mentorship. This can be a bit of a loaded term because of the way that it's thrown around online, but I want to make clear right now. Asking someone to perform emotional labor for you is not necessarily a bad thing. But it does mean that you should be respectful of the time and energy it takes for them to meet up with you on their free time and advise you in their area of expertise.

# Recognizing potential mentors

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One of the hardest things to learn is how to identify when you're in a mentorship to begin with. Especially when we're coaching new developers about what to look for, I think we tend to err on the side of talking about mentorships extremely formally. And when we give the advice of "go get a mentor" the prospect of doing so can seem oddly formal and stilted. I don't generally walk up to people I admire and would like to be friends with that I'm explicitly looking for friendship and would be interested in pursuing that with them. That would be stilted and weird. If you've never embarked on finding a mentor before, the process of doing this same thing to people you professionally admire can seem equally stilted and weird. And if you're just starting up in Python, you might not even necessarily know where to look to find mentors.



# Bad mentorship candidates

- Family
- Roommates
- Romantic Partners
- Anyone with whom you have a financial relationship

# Good mentoring candidates

- Managers
- Peers (work/meetup groups/code & coffee)
- Community organizers
- Open source maintainers
- Twitter! 🐦

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Twitter? Yes really. Twitter. Remember, I would never have started to code in the first place if I hadn't gotten that last extra morale push from some random stranger on Twitter. People engage online because they care about what they're saying. If you show a genuine interest and are respectful of their time, they are likely to lend it to you as a way of paying forward the help that they received when they were in your position.

# Iffy mentoring candidates

## → Friends

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It's much easier to move from a mentoring relationship to a friendship than the other way around.

This is not to say that friends can't or shouldn't help you out, but the level of critical feedback that a mentor can and should provide might put strain on a friendship in ways that can be hard to recover from.

I have several friends who started out as teachers and mentors and I'm very grateful to have them. But the shifting in that relationship means that I don't rely on them as heavily for the same kinds of advice anymore because we are now emotionally invested in one another's lives and successes in a way that is not conducive to tough love and saying hard truths.

Go to your friends and your professional cheerleading sessions when you decide you want to embark on a new chapter in your life and want unconditional support. Go to your mentor after you stumble and need help ironing out the implementation details.

# Formal vs informal mentorships

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So this is maybe a squishier definition of mentorship than many people might have encountered. There might be formal mentorship programs at your work, and that carries more weight to it, but that doesn't mean that's the only type of mentorship out there.

# Warning signs: just like any other relationship, mentorships can become toxic

- Scheduling difficulties
- Breaking promises
- Guilt
- Disagreements about commitment

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If this is beginning to sound a little bit like a relationship talk, that's because it is. Mentoring is a relationship and can go sour just as much as any other relationship.

Specifically because there is a power imbalance baked into the format of this relationship, it can be a very difficult to walk. This is why you don't want to increase the pressure of that relationship. As a mentee, you should not feel guilty regarding the state of your mentorship. And if you find yourself breaking promises or having difficulty justifying mentoring appointments in your schedule these may be warning signs that you have overcommitted in order to keep this relationship afloat *or* that your mentor is making unreasonable asks and has unrealistic expectations of your abilities. In general you should be looking for mentors who you think have the ability to make you a better version of yourself. You should be doing this for yourself and not for them. The primary goal of a mentorship is *not* gaining your mentor's approval or regard. If you find that you have entered into that territory, you're breaking a emotional boundary that will prevent you from growing and learning from this experience.

Why is it important to prevent this kind of emotional breach? Because coding work is hard, and emotional labor is hard, and being a mentee probably involves both. Tech has fairly high attrition rates as compared to other industries, and women leave tech at twice the rate that men do. This is important because diversity of viewpoints and skillsets is absolutely necessary for our industry to keep growing and making products that impact people's lives. If you aren't able to maintain professional boundaries with your mentors, you're more likely to burn out and become an attrition statistic, which is something that hopefully everyone in this room wants to avoid.

# YOU have to ask, they won't come to you.

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So you've done your research, identified people that you'd like to work with and can help you out with specific, actionable requests, and who seem like they're out in the community a bit and might like to talk to you. What do you do?

You have to be a bit brave. You have to ask. Figure out public conversation streams that they are most active on (twitter, meetups, etc.) and ask them questions. If you have more than one or two questions, maybe say something like "I have a few things to ask, is it okay if I take up some of your time?"

It's your responsibility as the potential mentee to initiate the conversation. It's also your responsibility to be okay with it if the answer is no. It doesn't necessarily mean you aren't worth helping or anything (I know I fall into this trap sometimes when approaching people I admire). Them saying no probably has nothing to do with you. You need to be able to accept that answer gracefully and you should not pester them with subsequent asks.



# Why should I have a mentee?

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Purely altruistic reasons, because it's the right thing to do - pass along your knowledge so that other people can benefit from it right? Uh. Not exactly. I'll talk a bit about this later, but I don't believe in doing things for purely altruistic reasons.

Keeps you honest about what you know and what you don't. Encourages you to keep learning and sharpening your skills beyond what is comfortable.

Helps you build a reputation in your local community as someone who is knowledgeable and dependable.

Remember, mentorships are inherently unbalanced. Once your mentee outgrows the help that you are giving them, they have the potential to become a valuable peer who will possibly help and advocate for you in the future.

# What are my responsibilities as a mentor?

- Showing up on time
- Honest feedback
- Shutting down rabbit hole excursions
- Admitting ignorance and vulnerability

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Your primary responsibility as a mentor is to ask questions and provide honest critical feedback. You might have to be blunt, and this is exactly why a measure of professional distance is necessary to do the job effectively. It's also a good idea for you to learn how to exhibit vulnerability in front of your mentee.

# How do I show that I'm available as a mentor?

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Like we talked about earlier, seeking out mentorship is the mentee's responsibility. They need to ask for help when they need it. But there are things you can do to position yourself as someone who is able to help.

Be active on Twitter, irc, or appropriate slack channels in your area of expertise. Go to or organize meetups. When you're out in the community, initiate conversations with people you don't know. It's really the same advice I would give anyone looking to network. Once you develop a solid enough network with people from a variety of backgrounds, people will feel comfortable coming to you as a leader in the community.

I know that it's easier said than done, but remember that mentorships might be informal and short lived. This is okay, it's healthy, and participating in those smaller, shorter mentorships will help lay the foundation for you to become a better, more confident mentor as you gain experience.

# Warning signs: you'll need to be on the lookout for different things as a mentor

- Sponsorship asks
- Financial asks
- Feelings of resentment
- Relitigating and adjusting your boundaries

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Just like for mentees, emotional and professional boundary breaches are potentially damaging to your mental health. It's imperative that you take care of yourself first before you can help out someone else. Yes, this person views you as a mentor. But that doesn't mean you owe them anything more than whatever you originally agreed on. If a mentee of yours is insisting that you advocate for them or assist them financially as part of you being a "good mentor," it means that they're not actually looking to gain from your experience and instead are looking to use you for something. I don't know about you, but I don't appreciate that, personally.

Interlude here about deluge of emails from potential DBC students and recent DBC grads asking me to pick my brain and demanding coffee in the middle of the day (especially the one or two that asked that I purchase their coffee for them!)

# It's okay to say NO!

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## But you should try saying yes if you never have before.

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Managing healthy boundaries is important for both parties, but the mentor is inherently going to need to be more protective of their time and mental/emotional resources.

Whether or not you realize it, you're probably acting as a mentor in some capacity to someone in your life. This could be a more junior coworker, or even a twitter conversation with a CS student who has a question about your open source contributions. Like we've talked about before, mentorships don't have to be formal. But it helps you be effective and safe with your mental and emotional resources when you understand that this is the kind of relationship you are engaging with and know how to respond or pull back appropriately.

As a mentor, you are entitled to pull back or decide you want to leave at any time. If you think that your mentee is not treating your time with respect and isn't actually benefiting from your experience, it is not worth spending that time on them.



# How to end a mentorship

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There are several reasons you might want to end a mentorship. True, some are toxic and should just be dropped. Other times, you might realize that you've crossed the boundary into friendship and it's affecting the quality of advice you're able to impart. Lastly, the mentee might have gotten to the point where the mentor no longer has any useful advice or feedback to give.

In order to identify when this has happened, you should have concrete goals and regularly check in on them. Mentorships are rarely indefinite, long term arrangements. Either set an expiration date on your mentorship when you first initiate it, or keep up regular health checks to make sure that what you're doing is still useful for both parties. If it's not, it's okay to wish one another well and say goodbye. Or to become drinking buddies, or conference friends, or mutual twitter follows. But make sure you understand the level of emotional commitment and assistance will probably not be the same after that. It can't be. Mentoring the same person indefinitely is a one way ticket to burnout. And you both have a responsibility to one another to make sure that burnout doesn't happen.



# Memento Mori

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Despite the skulls, it's not all acutally doom and gloom. I know I've focused on the negative here, but that's because I truly believe that mentoring people is valuable.

Memento Mori is a medieval concept that reminds us that our time is finite, and to treasure vitality and the time we do have as a result of that. It's a little grim, but those of you who have seen me talk in Chicago know that I like to bring in a bit of morose real talk just to make sure you're all still paying attention. It's late in the day and I wouldn't fault you for dozing off a bit. :P

But this is why I said earlier that I don't believe in doing things for purely altruistic reasons. Because time is finite and we only get to do so many things with our time as developers and mentors and friends and everything else, you should always know *why* you are doing something. Deciding that you want to become the go-to person in your community for teaching people how to use scikit learn, that's a valid reason. But you should not do it because you think that's just what's expected of you. Life is too short to live on the basis of other people's expectations.

# Thank you

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Now that we've left on what I hope is both a high and a low note, thanks for coming to my talk. I'm happy to take questions, and I hope maybe you've identified some arrangements in your life that are mentorships and how to get the most out of them.