

Why You Should Choose a Champion, Not a Mentor, for Guidance



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The idea of mentoring in the workplace is a common one, but the idea of a champion is rarely ever

mentioned. In the past several months, I have been invited to speak around the topic of leadership in startups and technology, and when I mention that what we need are more champions and less mentors, people get excited. The energy level in the room suddenly rises. Most people say to me, “I’ve never heard that before. I love that idea -- champion!”

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Mentors are a dime a dozen.

Mentors are typically [loose connections](#), and there are plenty to go around. Let’s do a quick, very unscientific poll. Based on my network on LinkedIn, I have 308,830 mentors in my network. I did the same search for champion, and I had 40,317 champions.

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Mentors are easier to come by these days. Some organizations have formal processes for matching mentors. I've only engaged in this type of formal matching once, and I was assigned a Harvard professor who was an expert in nuclear terrorism. Let's just say that we did not have much in common, but I was very grateful for the time I spent with someone so brilliant.

It is best that you try to seek mentors whose expertise you can leverage. Don't be shy about reaching out to these people directly without a formal process in place. One way to start is to ask them a question about their own career progression. And do not take it personally if they do not respond. People are busy.

Mentors are usually passive.

Don't expect your mentor to become your champion. Champions are supposed to be rare. They are rare because in my experience, most people have never heard of a champion. This post aims to change this by making people aware of the concept of a champion.

Think of a champion as a mentor but with a little more skin in the game. They are actively seeing that you get the good projects at work, that you receive the proper recognition for your job, and they provide you with timely feedback so that you are constantly improving. It's a working partnership where you are essentially groomed for a particular position or role. A champion is your voice when you are not around.

Mentors may give you time, advice and sometimes they are willing to make a few introductions. Don't get me wrong, this is great, but what distinguishes a mentor and champion is that a champion is willing to take more of a risk on you.

Related: [Success Is Likelier When You Make People Happy They Helped You](#)

Champions are earned.

You cannot just waltz into a new job or career and ask for someone to be your champion. When I started my career on Wall Street, I did not know what I was doing. I had a journalism degree, and my first day on the job I had to build a financial model from scratch. My senior associate would have rather worked with anyone else but me.

The reality is that there is no time to train on the job on Wall Street. You have a deliverable in 24 hours, and there is no time to teach someone how to do things. Like a startup -- it's sink or swim. I was left with only one choice: Forgo sleeping that night and make it happen. I did not allow mistakes and setbacks (not saving my model and having it crash, losing hours of work) mess with my confidence. I finally earned my senior associate's trust after one year of working 80 hour weeks side-by-side. I eventually became someone he could take into battle with him and deliver. It has been 17 years, and he is one of my greatest champions

and was an investor in my first startup.

Be wary of the professional mentor.

Some people mentor to pad their resume. When I see people put it on their LinkedIn bio, I cringe a little. My personal philosophy may not be popular, but I feel a mentor should selflessly help others and not try to gain anything other than serving. I rather have someone else call me their mentor, than call myself a mentor. For me it's not a job -- it's a role I play in people's lives. The

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So how do you get started finding a champion? You don't. A champion finds you. They see the fire in your belly and the determination in your eyes. They've seen you perform, fail and keep trying. They know they can take a personal risk, because they know you will not let them down. In every single case where I have had a champion, that person believed in me long before I ever believed in myself.

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