

Finding a Mentor Who's Right for You

(By Melinda Pittman)

There's nothing quite like the feeling of landing a great job, the job you've been searching for, the one that fills you with a sense of excitement and anticipation. However, that great job also often comes with a sense of trepidation and anxiety, especially if you want to grow within the company ranks in a short amount of time. That's why finding a mentor once you join a company is an excellent way to show your commitment to the position while at the same time accelerating the growth of your career.

The good news is that many companies have formal mentoring programs. That means they will help to pair you with a more experienced employee for the dual purpose of transferring valuable knowledge and acclimating you to the company's culture. The ideal time to ask about a company's policy toward mentoring (i.e., whether or not they have a formal program) is during the interview stage. This will give you a crystal-clear idea of what to expect once you begin your new position.

Communicate your needs

If the company does have a formal program, you won't have to find a mentor. One will be assigned to you. A formal mentoring program, like many employment situations, can be either a positive or negative experience depending upon the specific circumstances involved, but that's an article for another time. What if you've just started a new position and are seeking a mentor, but the company does **not** offer a formal program?

Unfortunately, many employees are apprehensive about approaching their new supervisors about being paired with a mentor—or about asking a seasoned veteran to become their mentor. Instead, they fumble through the early stages of their employment, wasting valuable time and energy, until they come up to speed on their own. If you're serious about engaging another person in a meaningful mentoring relationship, make sure that you communicate this to your immediate supervisor. Share with them your enthusiasm for the endeavor, and emphasize how you believe it will help you to become a more productive worker in a shorter amount of time.

More than likely, your supervisor will share in your enthusiasm, or at the very least, acknowledge how such an arrangement would add to the value you bring to the company. As a result, they may help you to pair up with a mentor, or they may allow you to seek one out on your own.

A quick checklist

After you spend a week or two on the job, you'll be able to more easily identify those co-workers who have a wealth of knowledge and experience. You'll also be able to identify which ones are good candidates for a mentorship. However, there are other criteria that you may not have considered, which I've described below.

- **They must be a good listener.** Being a good mentor doesn't mean doing all the talking. An effective mentor must know as much as they can about you, so that they can help you to succeed in every way possible. This means they should be familiar your goals, ambitions, personality, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. To discover these things, they'll have to listen as much as they talk.
- **They must be honest.** Honesty is not only a virtue, it's a catalyst for progress. A good mentor has to walk the fine line between encouraging you and admonishing you. That's the quickest way

for you to achieve professional growth. But remember, it's a balance. You don't want somebody who brow beats you all the time.

- **They should have different strengths than you.** A mentor who is skilled in a certain area that you're not will be able to help you improve in that area. Engaging in a mentoring relationship shouldn't reinforce your weaknesses; it should minimize them, eliminate them all together, or ideally, transform them into strengths.

Asking—don't be afraid to

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about finding a mentor is that you shouldn't be afraid to ask. You might think that you're bothering the person, but more than likely, they're going to consider it a compliment that you've asked them in the first place. In addition, people who have experienced a great deal of success and accumulated a wealth of knowledge are usually glad to pass on that knowledge and experience. After all, it's rather difficult to become successful unless you know how to deal with people and enjoy dealing with them.

If you have any questions about forming a mentoring relationship or about mentoring programs in general, feel free to contact me at Melinda@thePittmanGroup.com.

Maximizing Your Mentoring Relationship

(By Melinda Pittman)

In our last issue, we discussed the steps to take in order to find a mentor who's right for you. But once you've found a mentor and have started down the road with your relationship, what's next? How do you manage the relationship so that both parties get the most out of it that they can?

Troubleshooting

The first step is to identify any possible problems or complications and then formulate a plan for overcoming them. As in any relationship, pitfalls are lurking everywhere. Below are some of the potential obstacles in a mentoring relationship, problems that can pop up **after** the arrangement has already been agreed upon and begun.

- The mentor is too busy.
- The person being mentored is asking for too much help and/or too much time.
- The person being mentored begins to broach topics or seek advice that is outside the mentoring relationship boundaries.

There are others that may affect the quality and effectiveness of the relationship, most notably other priorities in the lives of both individuals. The key to overcoming these potential obstacles is consistent communication.

Communication is the key

There are two main forms of communication that you should be concerned with in a mentoring relationship. The first type is **planning and preparation**, which can help diffuse many of the most common problems outlined above. First and foremost, this preparation involves the meticulous planning of meetings. The most important thing to remember is that how long you meet isn't as important as how frequently you meet.

In addition, make certain that when you do meet, your attention is focused solely on the task at hand. Don't try to check email, voice messages, etc. You can do that another time. You'll derive the most benefit from the mentoring relationship if you give it the undivided attention it requires. Also, be **flexible** in your planning. If you get into a rhythm and it's disrupted, adapt to the changes so that your meetings can continue on a regular basis.

The second type of important communication is **feedback**. This feedback should occur in both directions, from the mentor to their protégé and vice-versa. The natural assumption might be that the mentor will provide all of the feedback, but for the relationship to be truly as productive as it can be, the person being mentored needs to offer feedback, as well. This type of interaction will help to promote the overall health and well-being of the relationship.

Measuring progress

Another type of communication in any mentoring engagement deals with ensuring that you monitor its progress and make any adjustments accordingly. This can be accomplished by scheduling regular meetings designed for just this purpose. The meetings should be more frequent at the beginning of the relationship and then can be spaced further apart as it begins to mature and operate in a smoother fashion.

When evaluating progress, there are a number of benchmark questions that both people should ask. Some of those include the following:

- Are we making maximum use of our time?
- Are we communicating consistently and effectively?
- Are we on track to meet our stated goals?
- What could we change/modify/add that would make things better?

It's incumbent upon the person being mentored to initiate these progress meetings, since in the final analysis, they stand to benefit the most from the relationship and any efforts to maximize its overall value.

The final ingredient—time

Last but certainly not least, a mentoring relationship needs the appropriate amount of time in order to develop and reach its full potential. Again, this rule applies to just about any relationship you have with another person. Over time, you'll be able to better ascertain how the other person likes to work, how they prefer to handle situations, etc., and they will be able to do the same when it comes to you.

There's bound to be some awkward moments at the beginning. However, if you recognize that those are a natural part of the process, you can work through them and use them as the launching pad for what could become a very productive, rewarding, and satisfying mentoring relationship.

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Entering the Final Phase of a Mentoring Relationship

(By Melinda Pittman)

In our last two issues, we've discussed mentoring relationships, specifically how to build them and then how to maximize their effectiveness. In today's third and final part of the series, let's discuss what happens at the conclusion of a mentoring relationship.

However, let me clarify up front that these types of relationships don't really come to an end, or at least they shouldn't, not if the people involved believe that continuing them in some fashion would be beneficial. What actually happens is a "transition." The relationship transitions from one phase to another. So for the purposes of this article, we'll be using that terminology.

Planning is essential

There are two main ways in which a mentoring relationship transitions to the final phase:

- After the goals and objectives of the mentorship have been achieved and both individuals agree that the time has come to move forward
- The mentor or the protégé believes, for whatever reason, that the relationship has outlasted its usefulness in its current state

The best-case scenario for most mentoring relationships would be the first option listed above. It would indicate that the relationship was maximized to its fullest potential. But since we've transitioned to the final phase, what exactly does that entail? Well, like everything else in the relationship to this point, it should entail whatever the individuals involved have planned.

Now that we've established that the relationship shouldn't come to an abrupt end, but should be transitioned into another phase, **planning is essential**. As the relationship matures and goals and objectives are reached, the mentor and the protégé should begin to discuss the future and how their interactions will change (or more accurately, evolve) once that transition occurs.

This planning should culminate in the final meeting of the formal mentoring relationship phase, during which the mentor and protégé should evaluate all aspects of the mentorship and use that evaluation as a springboard for the next phase. That next phase, of course, will be more informal and will include fewer encounters. However, if your mentor works for the same company that you do, you may still see them on an everyday basis.

The key to remember is that the phases of a mentoring relationship, including the final one, are very **individualized**. In other words, everybody has their own personality and ways in which they prefer to work and interact. By this stage of the relationship, you should be familiar enough with one another to plot an accurate course for the next phase. And whatever course you choose (a phone call after work once a month, for example), make sure it's designed to provide the most benefit.

Don't stop now!

And just because you've transitioned to the final phase of one mentoring relationship doesn't mean you can't start another one. This could be the perfect opportunity for you to further enhance your professional knowledge by engaging another person who has different strengths and more knowledge than you possess. Refer to the first two articles in this series for information regarding ways in which to do just that.

Mentoring relationships can be an extremely beneficial and satisfying way to experience growth as a person and employee and also put yourself in a position to achieve all of your career ambitions. If you've never been in a mentoring relationship, I encourage you to consider one. Personal development and improvement are continuous endeavors, investments that can pay off down the road in ways you might never imagine. So don't wait—start now.

If you have any questions about this topic, please contact me at melinda@thepittmangroup.com.