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Mentors: Not Just for Kids Anymore

Take a strategic approach to finding the best mentor for you, and reap the many rewards. *By ANN CARLSEN*

You're never too old to be mentored. Once the exclusive pursuit of the fresh-faced and wet-behind-the-ears, mentorship now has a place in any business person's professional development. Wherever you are in your career, you can benefit from the guidance of a trusted advisor who helps you identify your strengths, address your weaknesses and achieve your goals.

Traditionally, a mentor was a wise elder who bestowed knowledge on a younger person, à la Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker. The old-school paternalistic approach migrated to the corporate world, where senior-level executives groomed hand-picked rising stars for greatness. Today, mentorship is a two-way partnership dedicated to career goals that both parties agree to. A mentor is strongest where you are weakest, challenging you and offering experience and knowledge in areas you might not otherwise pursue.

Would-be "mentees" no longer must wait to be picked: anyone can ask anyone else to dance. Young people can still look to older, more senior executives to show them the ropes. But an older employee facing new technologies or new business models may just as easily seek out the wisdom of a younger colleague. You can seek guidance from an associate at the same professional level, or from someone outside the company. A manager might even look to a front-line colleague for mentorship. Position in the corporate hierarchy isn't important; the only thing that matters is what you're trying to achieve.

Successful mentorship isn't necessarily about pats on the back. If you just want a cheerleader, call your mom. A good mentor will help build your self-confidence by setting high performance expectations and holding you accountable for meeting them. He or she will brainstorm with you about how to achieve your goals and challenge you to think more deeply about yourself, your life and your career. Over the course of your relationship, your mentor will also:

- Teach by example and connect you to projects and experiences that will stretch your abilities;
- Encourage you to behave professionally and call you on negative behavior and attitude;
- Help you deal with political situations;
- Tell you the truth about yourself, good and not-so-good;
- Introduce you to a wider network of influential people;
- Stand by you when the going gets tough.

Mentors benefit from the relationship as well. In addition to the satis-

faction of giving back to their professional community, mentors are often energized by, and gain new insights from, the people they counsel.

Before you start looking, know what you need in a mentor. Base-line attributes are availability, honesty and trustworthiness. Beyond those basics, what gaps in your knowledge and experience do you want to fill? Do you need more help with political savvy, industry expertise or company connections? Narrowing your priorities will help bring your ideal mentor into focus.



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Now, draw on your network. People you know will be more willing to work with you. I read about a young entrepreneur who approached Martha Stewart at a conference to ask for guidance and was heartbroken when the media mogul brushed her off. A high-profile big shot may be able to open doors that someone closer to home can't, but don't let the stars in your eyes limit your view. As you think about candidates, be sure to think about peers and subordinates as well as superiors.

Many companies and professional organizations such as Women in Cable Telecommunications and the National Association for Multi-Ethnicity in Communications offer formal mentoring programs. If you can

draw on these resources, you're in luck. But even if that's not the case, mentors are available to you.

Ask likely suspects in your company if they're willing to advise you. If your candidates are too overloaded to take you on, ask them to suggest other people to approach. Ask your boss, HR department or professional acquaintances at other companies for suggestions. Don't forget people you've met in community work and other activities.

Be prepared to use your mentor's time well. Tell your mentor when you act on his or her advice. Be appreciative and considerate, and look for ways to return the favor. Above all, listen to your mentor with an open mind; it could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

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