How to Find a Great Mentor — and Be a Great Mentee
Take a few simple steps and set yourself up for success

By Alexa D’Agostino

S

ometimes success is all about who you know. So it makes sense that the more people you know, the more opportunities you will have — and that means going beyond your immediate circle of family and friends to build an academic and professional network. One of the most important components of establishing a solid network is finding a mentor. A good mentor can guide and support you on your academic and career paths, and can be instrumental in helping you create your professional brand. But what exactly is a mentor, and how do you find one?

A mentor is someone who typically has more extensive skills, experience, and wisdom than you do. The mentor’s role is to help you develop and grow both professionally and personally, so typically your mentor will work in a field similar to the one where you currently work or are looking to work or to advance. Finding a good mentor takes time and perseverance, but if you’re willing to put in the effort, the benefits are well worth it.

Before you decide on a mentor, make sure you understand what you need. Ask yourself why you want a mentor, how long you want the mentor relationship to last, and what you are looking to get out of the relationship. Also, do you want someone with a similar background you can relate to, or someone with a different viewpoint who perhaps might challenge you and broaden your perspectives? Once you’ve identified what you want in a mentor, it’s time to start looking for the right one.

Reach out to those in your personal and professional networks to see if you can find someone who meets your criteria and is willing to invest the time and energy needed to be a successful mentor. You can also look to career centers, advisors, the student affairs department, and groups and organizations that you are part of to find a mentor. If there is an individual you admire but don’t know directly, see if you can find a mutual connection, or reach out to them via LinkedIn.

Once you’ve found a mentor, make sure that you are a good mentee. Mentoring is a two-way street, and your ability to communicate openly and honestly with your mentor is critical. Make an effort to get to know your mentor and understand how they like to interact — do they prefer to meet in person or touch base via email or phone? Also, be clear about your goals, and make sure you follow through on everything you commit to.

Finding a mentor is a process, but it’s worth it. Remember that your mentor is doing you a favor, so be appreciative of their time, advice, suggestions, and ideas. A good mentor-mentee relationship will be beneficial for both parties, and can help you get where you want to go — personally and professionally.

Chelsea Chee is a diversity and inclusion coordinator at the New Mexico Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR). She earned her BS in environmental science from the University of Arizona, followed by a dual master’s degree in community and regional planning and public administration from the University of New Mexico. Chee is actively involved in her community and serves as the director of community at Etikie, a social enterprise that provides financial stability for Native American artisans through the design of luxury accessories. Here she answers several questions on mentoring and suggests ways mentees can make the most of their relationship with a mentor.

What is mentoring? What does it mean to be a mentor?
There is a lot written on mentoring. Through my research, I connected with the following concepts because they recognize that mentorship is a partnership — each person brings something to the table, and both are unique with their own life paths: Mentoring is a power-free partnership between two individuals who want mutual growth and requires perseverance. One of the individuals usually has greater skills, experiences, and wisdom to share. Mentoring concentrates on the needs of the one being mentored, not on the agenda of the mentor.
Why should someone have a mentor? Sometimes in life we come to a crossroads or a huge mountain or don’t have a map. Mentors can help guide us toward the best path(s) to move us forward. They can provide a different way to look at an issue, ask tough questions, provide options that we may not even think of, and support our decisions. Most mentors have a valuable network of resources and people they have spent time to assemble, and they can share it with you. Mentors can also help us be more productive and accomplish our goals faster.

How does someone find a good mentor? Finding a good mentor will take some time and work. There are many types of mentors, and it would be a good idea to understand why you want a mentor and what kind of mentor you want before looking for one. Some questions to ask yourself are: Why do I want a mentor? Do I want a formal or informal mentoring relationship? Will this mentoring relationship be short or long term? What kind of mentor do I want — a peer, a faculty or staff member, a graduate student, someone in the industry, or all the above? Do I want a mentor whose identities (like gender, ethnicity, race) are similar to mine — or not?

Where should I look for a mentor? Places to look are career centers/advisors, the student affairs center, your academic department, student clubs/organizations (e.g., AISES, SACNAS [Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science], NSBE [National Society of Black Engineers]), and at conferences.

What are your top tips for being a good mentor or mentee?

• Get to know one another. Offer information you are comfortable sharing (e.g., who you are, where you’re from, what you’re working on). Mentees, don’t forget to communicate why you want a mentor. Mentors, consider the impact of the student’s ethnicity and other group identities (gender, age, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, education level, generation in college, physical capabilities) on the mentoring relationship.

• Establish values and expectations. Figure out what values you both agree will make the mentoring relationship work (e.g., open mind, respect, honesty). Make sure both people know what is expected of them; use student-staff handbooks if needed. Establish relationship boundaries and confidentiality. Figure out your meeting dates, times, and locations. Try to set agendas for each meeting.

• Set clear goals. Make sure both people know what they’re working toward. Establish milestones; these can include tentative plans and timelines for achieving specific goals.

• Conduct a periodic evaluation. Mentors, draw up a “contract” with your mentee that includes a well-articulated set of responsibilities and expectations for both parties in the mentoring relationship. At least once a year formally assess your mentee’s progress and set goals and identify milestones for the coming year. Mentees can complete a form detailing which requirements are fulfilled and their plans for the coming year.

• Build networks. Mentors, draw on colleagues and alumni to help your mentee. Introduce mentees to a broad network of contacts and encourage them to learn about opportunities in related fields.

What is the most important thing for mentees? Recognize that not every mentor is the same as you. Not everyone takes the same path and will choose the same career. Communicate! Try your best to stay in communication; neither person can read the other’s mind.