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■ Characteristics of a good mentor

Finding a Mentor

by Elisabeth Hendrickson

Perhaps you've just changed careers and are looking for a leg up in your new chosen field. Perhaps you're an old pro wondering how to take your career to the next level. No matter

how long you've been doing what you do, it's always good to have someone by your side to help move your career forward—a mentor.

The word "mentor" comes from the mythical character Mentor, wise man and trusted friend of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus counted on Mentor to keep his home safe during his absence and guide his son, Telemachus. Athena, goddess of wisdom, often assumed Mentor's form in order to give the mortals advice. Like Homer's Mentor, some mentors may be blessed with something that appears as more-than-mortal wisdom. A mentor provides advice based on experience, helps you navigate around personal and professional obstacles, and acts as a mirror to enable you to see yourself more clearly.

Mentors Give Flying Lessons

One of my earliest mentors was Mrs. Rosenthal, the biology teacher at my high school. An imposing figure in a diminutive body, Mrs. Rosenthal didn't mince words. She told me what she was thinking whether or not I wanted to hear it. She encouraged me to find my own interests. She raised my self-confidence by asking my advice on how to teach difficult concepts to the class one year younger than I: "How can I get this message through to the students? You were in my class. How did you think about it?"

Mrs. Rosenthal taught me to fly by showing me how it's done. She showed me that women can excel in science and helped me learn how to think for myself. Like Mrs. Rosen-

thal, the most effective mentors encourage you to test your wings and fly. They cheer your successes and introduce you to others who might be able to help you soar to even higher levels. They tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. They recognize that mentoring is a two-way street; they're learning as much from you as you are from them. It takes a secure person to be a good mentor, someone who can honestly say, "I taught her everything I know" instead of "I taught her everything she knows."

Another of my mentors was also my manager at a software company. Not all managers are mentors, but Risa did far more for me than a typical manager. She made sure I was continuously challenged and allowed me to take risks that not all managers would be willing to accept. She coached me in working with upper managers. Finally, she showed me how a good mentor helps her protégé fly. Several months after I started working for Risa, she presented me with an opportunity. On our way back from lunch one day, she asked me, "If a position opened up in the client group, would you take it?"

"No," I said, without pause. Taking a job in the client group would mean I wouldn't work for her anymore and I didn't want to lose her as my manager. A heartbeat later, I became curious. "Why do you ask?"

Of course, a position had opened up in that other group—a far more senior and challenging position. To this day, Risa refers to the day I left her group as the day I "left the nest." I frame the event a little differently.

Like any good mother bird, she kicked me out of the nest after teaching me to fly.

You Already Know Your Mentors

Good mentors are special people. So how do you find such a person?

Take a look at the people around you. Whom among them do you admire? Whom do you wish to learn from? Who can help you attain the skills you need? Look everywhere, not just in the obvious places. You may find potential mentors at work, in your family, or in your community. They may be people you already know well or people you've barely met.

Look for people with complementary skills to yours. For example, if you are a new test manager, maybe you'd benefit from a mentor with pure management experience. If you're a tester, perhaps someone with contrasting test skills could help expand your range. Someone can be a good mentor on a single subject; mentors don't need to know more than you do about all aspects of your job.

Beware of choosing mentors only for the power they wield. It's far better to spend time with an individual contributor who possesses a great deal of wisdom than a VP whose only attribute is the influence she could use to get you a promotion. What you learn from a wise person will last a lifetime. What you get from a powerful person will only last as long as their influence over your career lasts—and perhaps not even that long. It's fine to look to executive row to find a mentor, but find someone who has much more to offer than positional authority.

Look for Common Ground

Search for people with whom you have something in common, whether it's

shared values, gender, ethnic background, or sense of humor. Having a connection to your mentor beyond your desire to learn from him will help establish and sustain the relationship.

After all, a good mentoring relationship is much like a friendship. It's a connection that needs to be nurtured in order to grow. Establishing a relationship with a mentor takes time. It's not enough to ask, "Will you mentor me?" You must continue the relationship, investing yourself and ensuring that the relationship is reciprocal.

I once participated in a mentorship program for high school students. Most of the students were wonderful to work with, but one young man rubbed me the wrong way. He told me in an imperious tone of voice that I was to find him a job with a high-technology company. He wasn't looking for a mentor; he wanted a job placement counselor. A mentoring relationship is about spending time getting to know someone who has wisdom and experience that can help you in the long term. It's not about finding a job; it's about shaping a career.

Make an effort to spend unstructured time with your mentor away from the pressures of work. You'll end up talking about ideas or events that are unrelated to the reason you chose that person as a mentor. However, if you choose your mentors well, you'll learn something every time you get together, even if it wasn't what you expected to learn.

You can strengthen your relationship with your mentor by finding ways to help him. Perhaps your mentor has

a large project and could use help organizing it. Perhaps she needs a sounding board. Even something as simple as helping to assemble the materials for a big meeting can be an opportunity for you to work closely together. Find ways to make your relationship an integral part of your life rather than something you have to remember to think about.

Don't Get Hung Up on the "M" Word

Not everyone thinks of himself as a mentor. I have some mentors with whom I don't use the "m" word for fear of making our relationship awkward.

Search for people with whom you have something in common, whether it's shared values, gender, ethnic background, or sense of humor.

Some people are more comfortable when they don't feel that they're on a pedestal. Being called a mentor might cause performance anxiety: "Mentor? What's a mentor? What do I do? How do I know I'm being a good mentor?"

You don't need to call a friend a "mentor" in order to learn what she has to teach. It's the learning, not the title, that makes mentors special. If the word "mentor" doesn't seem to come natu-

rally as a way to describe the relationship, just don't use it. After all, why run the risk of ruining a perfectly good friendship?

Thank You, Mrs. Rosenthal

My one regret about my relationship with Mrs. Rosenthal is that I never adequately expressed my gratitude to her. So now I'll say thank you, Mrs. Rosenthal, for encouraging me and believing in me, for teaching me lessons I sorely needed, and for demonstrating the power of mentorship.

For those of you in search of a mentor, may you find a Mrs. Rosenthal to be a role model, a manager who will kick you out of the nest when it's time, or a friend who will coach you in new skills. Mentors take many forms. May you find the mentors you seek when you most need them. *STQE*

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