

# **MENTORING FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT and enriching relationships in general**

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**Being a creative, productive mentor.** You can star in your own Greek myth as Mentor or the goddess of wisdom, Athena. Odysseus put Mentor in charge of his household when he left to fight the Trojan war. Part of his responsibility was the protection and teaching of Odysseus' son, Telemachus. The goddess of wisdom added her powers to the process when she assumed Mentor's guise.

As is usual in Greek myths and many stories with metaphors for your life, this brief summary of Mentor's assistance to Telemachus offers opportunities and insights that relationships offer. For example, this story raises questions such as:

- Who is the actual mentor?
- Where do power and influence reside?
- What is the motivation of each person?

From your own experience, you may have seen how the benefits of another person's wisdom and experience coupled with your own good judgment and skills are a powerful catalyst for development and success. The process provides learning opportunities for everyone involved, whether through modeling behavior, leading, providing information and feedback, training, and inspiring one another. Sharing connections you have with others can also be part of the experience.

The related broader view here adds another choice to typical mentoring as a one-way, vertical process with the mentor in control. Not only does the traditional approach tend to reinforce hierarchy and its associations with control and formality, but also dependency. Yet an effective mentor can offset these tendencies by eventually letting go of the connection as the recipient blooms and becomes self-sufficient.

The two-way, interactive process described for you here is based on exchange and mutual benefit involving more ambiguous roles. This can include comparing lists of possible skills and services exchanges, agreeing on incentives and set-asides of time, and acknowledging contributions of each person in performance assessments and informal feedback.

The relationship is more likely to develop best when third parties do not require it, but *is* supported by guidelines and incentives that respect shared values. Whether encouraged by others or self-initiated, you each can contribute to a good match, using intuition and common sense as you explore possibilities, responsibilities, and opportunities. In the process, be alert for ways to stimulate creativity and evident growth in new areas as you enjoy your mutual mentoring.

Though aspects of this article also relate to traditional mentoring, the two-way process is complementary. Together, you both learn and take risks, including working through natural

struggles and conflicts, with honest, useful feedback that's both frank and kind. New skills, knowledge, and understanding are developed and exchanged as perspectives and experiences are shared over time. As with other worthwhile relationships, goals for the process and for each person continue to be clarified as trust strengthens and circumstances shift or change.

Regardless of coming from the same or different backgrounds or situations, you may already be or develop into friends and colleagues. Other outcomes could be recognition that the process has come to a close successfully or a decision that better matches would be beneficial. Whatever unfolds, open communication is essential to save precious time and encourage effective results.

**Considering varieties of mutual mentoring.** Who might become mutual mentors? Here are examples you can add to, adapt, and deepen.

*Based on or emerging from situations outside of work:*

- a newcomer to a neighborhood with a long-time resident curious about other locations
- a parent and child or some other family pairing in which computer expertise is used to capture genealogy and intergenerational stories
- people from different cultures who want to understand one another's backgrounds and values
- friends who support and lead one another through challenging circumstances
- learners of any age with skills, information, or how-to experience each person wants to explore

*Based on facilitating work transitions*

- a first-time mother who has a career with an experienced mother who wants one
- a new father who plans to continue working with one who provides childcare at home
- a youth who wants to learn about the world of work and an experienced person who would benefit from answering thought-provoking questions about his profession

*Based on a conventional work situations:*

- an established leader facing a new challenge in an organization with one who has related experience and wants some guidance in using soft skills such as team building and persuasion
- a manager with a broad perspective fresh to a unique, focused group or situation with someone familiar with that territory
- an entrepreneur with external experience and interests relevant to an internal employee's unfolding career interests who can suggest business development opportunities and provide information to the entrepreneur

**Creating good matches.** Often western cultures laud rational, logical behavior in professional life. But your experience may be different; many relationships can be nonlinear and messy at times, whether they involve mentoring or not. In these circumstances, emotions,

values, and processes, such as effective communication, are just as important as logic to promote new skills, abilities, knowledge, and experience.

With this in mind, I encourage you to choose among and improve on the following questions. Imagine possible partnerships with one or more people and small groups, as well as exploring options with someone you have in mind.

#### *Individual preferences and needs*

- Do I like this person, or at least am I comfortable enough to want to get to know them well enough to communicate openly?
- Is there a good chance that we'll enjoy the mutual mentoring process most of the time?
- Is there a relative balance in what we want to and can offer one another, however different our knowledge and background?

#### *Interpersonal considerations*

- Do we have the interpersonal skills, self-knowledge, patience, and sense of humor to make this work? If not, what does each of us need to develop further? How could we help one another progress?
- What are the risks and benefits of our mutual collaboration?
- How will our differences enrich one another?
- Do our motivations, goals, and expectations related to starting a mentoring relationship seem to jibe?
- Can I imagine our coming to trust one another, if we don't already do so? How could that process be encouraged?

#### *Practical matters*

- Do we have the time and interest to make a viable commitment?
- What specific skills, knowledge, and experience do each of us have that might be transferred or shared?
- Are we willing to explore and agree on ground rules, including how long the process will last and how to handle misunderstandings and conflict?
- How well do our styles of communication, use of time, and giving and receiving assistance mesh?
- How will we honor one another's confidentiality and avoid doing harm?

Based on your intuition, experience and observations, what questions and concerns would you add to the bulleted lists below? And what improvements and changes will you make in the questions?

Thinking about and discussing your answers can set the relationship on a firm footing and help avoid detours, lost time, and misunderstandings. As you may have already seen in other relationships, tiptoeing around potential issues can limit trust and effectiveness — as well as enjoyment of relationships. Related limitations and blocks may include:

### *Hangovers from the past*

- blame or demonization of others
- interpretations of others' behavior based on projection
- unproductive behavior reflecting previous family dynamics

### *Personal tendencies*

- idolization and idealization
- power struggles and competition with others
- denial of realities
- lack of honesty with oneself about motivations, needs, and goals
- unrealistic expectations

### *Communication gambits*

- avoidance or indirection
- politeness that masks true feelings
- lacking content of mutual interest or being self-referential
- insensitive or immature humor
- vague, superficial language

**Starting up.** Certainly, varying interpersonal styles, experience, and levels of confidence will require a getting-to-know-you period until comfortable, useful communication reigns. Although there are arguments for having similar levels of intelligence and capacities, differences also provide opportunities for growth. Two exceptions to this are when significantly conflicting values and degrees of commitment create barriers to trust and progress.

For a first conversation, some basic themes can help both of you get used to organizing irreplaceable time for mutual mentoring. Agree on the value of exploring any of the following that seem useful through e-mail, letter, phone, online chats, and face to face. Such preliminary outreach can include sharing information about your backgrounds and interests.

### *First conversation*

- goals
- hopes
- expectations
- time commitments and constraints
- what to avoid

### *When ready to proceed*

- strengths of each person
- processes that support mutual thriving
- interests for the short and longer run
- creative ideas for new explorations

- lessons learned from past, related experiences, both positive and negative

As clarification progresses, benefits may also include:

- sharing materials, information, and contacts
- outlining together a simple plan of collaboration, open to change over time
- working on a manageable project of mutual interest
- identifying and practicing particular skills or processes to benefit each person
- doing a pleasant, agreed-upon outside activity as a way to appreciate one another and cement the connection

**Moving ahead.** Although many people expect logical or linear sequences in such relationships, ups, downs, leaps forward, doldrums, and regressions occur as you may imagine based on your experience in other situations. That's why periodic revisits of expectations and refreshment of plans can be useful for you both.

One way to test the value of your mutual mentoring process is to determine whether or not each of you look forward to spending time with one another. Another test is: Are you willing to make and fulfill promises? When unexpected demands get in the way of your plan, how do each of you give adequate notice? How do you deal with and address frustrations or disappointments?

Should a serious conflict or misunderstanding occur, maybe bring in a trusted third party, such as a mediator, coach, or anyone else without a vested interest in the outcome. Though disheartening at times, think of these issues as perverse gifts. The very skills used to address such discomfort and problems can add to both of your repertoires and improve expertise in conflict resolution.

As the mentoring process settles into a mostly pleasant and stimulating rhythm, take some time to appreciate and honor what's working well. A hand-written note, playful gift, or "certificate" of accomplishment are examples.

**Graduating.** At some point, the process may feel completed. You can then find new matters that would support continuing your present relationship, re-define how you spend your time together, or celebrate a successful ending.

**Adapting this process to other relationships.** As you consider these ideas and suggestions, you'll notice that they are directly relevant or can be adapted to a variety of situations. Imagine how you might use them to bring new energy, productivity, and pleasure to your relationships with colleagues, friends, family members, people considered "above your pay grade" — and even individuals you don't like. About them all, but especially those you avoid, you may not know what's behind their façade or actions until you vary your own behavior with them while keeping an open mind.

Now that you've taken what's useful from the foregoing, here is your jump start for action to avoid losing momentum:

- Imagine the mutual mentoring process you want and that's viable. What would its purpose be?
- To whom would you reach out for collaboration?
- How would you start a conversation?
- What specific first steps would make sense to take, considering who is involved and the context?
- What tangible and intangible incentives are available?

What do you need and want to add in order to begin?

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