



Finding the Right Mentor For You

By: F. Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA

Your business associates, friends, family, the web, industry associations, and periodicals provide you with a flow of information regarding news, business trends, and opportunities. Industry analysts, business associates, and networking contacts share their expert knowledge. But only a mentor can truly share his or her unique wisdom with you.

Mentorship refers to a developmental relationship in which a more experienced person helps a less experienced person, referred to as a protégé. The word itself was inspired by the character of Mentor in Homer's *Odyssey*. Though the actual Mentor in the story is a somewhat ineffective old man, the goddess Athena takes on his appearance in order to guide young Telemachus in his time of difficulty.

A mentor is someone with more entrepreneurial business experience than you have, who serves as a trusted confidant over an extended period of time. Why do they do this? First and foremost, as a way of giving back. They do it because they care about and respect you. They may do it to develop their skills as a teacher, manager, strategist, or coach. And a true mentoring relationship also works in both directions – the mentor learns about new ideas from you, just as you learn timeless wisdom from them.

The mentor's role is to provide an appropriate degree of challenge and support – emotional, technical, and tactical – so that you can build competence and confidence. The mentor is an information source supporting you with decision-making, problem-solving, and ongoing encouragement. His or her non-judgmental approach is most critical as your development hinges upon self-discovery.

Bill Gates first met his mentor at a dinner organized by his mother. He thought he would have nothing in common with him, because he was just 'this guy who picked stocks'. It turned out that they had more in common than he realized, and over the years, he would come to view him as his mentor. That man? Billionaire investor Warren Buffet.

Gates wrote a piece about his mentor detailing what he had learned from him. A big part of it was learning to think in different ways. Buffet doesn't just pick stocks, he analyzes companies, and tries to define what their "competitive moat" is -- the thing that gives them an advantage over competitors. Author of article: Andrew Blackman (January 7, 2015)

One of my favorite shows is "Shark Tank," where some of business's most successful investors, the sharks, offer invaluable advice, strategic partnerships, and mentoring to the business owners they back. Let's look at a few of their perspectives that give evidence to the power of a mentor.

As a mentor, Daymond John makes strategic introductions for his protégés and shows them how to apply his advice to their businesses. John recommends finding successful individuals who will speak with you on a weekly basis, such as a small business owner who operates a corner store and who is a pillar in the community.

Lori Greiner points out that mentors will listen to your struggles but also provide totally honest feedback, something you may not get from your friends and colleagues at work. Greiner says that people will be flattered if they are invited to serve as your mentor. She suggests seeking a person you admire, someone who has qualities that you'd like to emulate in your business and in life. She emphasizes that you should look for a mentor who appreciates teamwork and collaboration.

Robert Herjavec suggests listening carefully to successful business leaders, even when their advice is unsolicited or seemingly "off the cuff." As a young entrepreneur, he was told by an unexpected source that his approach was unscalable. He decided that this was a learning opportunity, started thinking bigger, changed his business model, and acted on the advice. The decision to apply the lesson from a "mentoring moment" led to his ultimate business success.

The sharks' tips on working with and keeping a mentor include:

- It's not enough to have an ambition or dream. Demonstrate drive and passion to enlist the full, ongoing support of a mentor.

- Success in business comes from concrete business plans. Mentors will deepen their relationship with you when they see your plan and observe you making steady progress toward achieving results.
- Mentors will ask hard questions and expect answers. They want their time to be well-spent. Be prepared for meetings with your mentor.
- Mentors are your sounding-board and will provide support and candid feedback, but they won't tell you specifically what to do. They can help you expand your network and perspective. However, it's up to you to embrace and act on their advice.

How do you go about finding a mentor?

Know Yourself: Consciously think about where you are in your career, and where you would like to be. Assess what type of personality you have, and which personality types complement your style. Consider your strengths and weaknesses and define how a mentor might best guide you.

Keep an Open Mind as to Who this Person Might Be: A mentor is someone who will help you grow in areas that are most important to you. This person is not necessarily your best friend, supervisor, or anyone with a high-ranking title, or even someone in the same business. It is far more important for you to look for someone who exemplifies the traits and skills that you want to adopt.

Identify Where You May Find a Suitable Mentor: Good sources of mentors include your management team, industry association, online communities, and professors. You may also wish to consider people in your non-workplace communities such as retirees, local business leaders, and people associated with your hobbies.

Know What You Want to Achieve from the Relationship: This is essential. A clear understanding of your purpose and the desired result will ensure that you find a suitable mentor. Without knowing what you wish to achieve, you will waste your time and that of the mentor. In the best of all worlds, it is not just you who will benefit from the relationship. The mentor will also see the opportunity for personal growth.

Think About People Who have been Mentors in the Past: Whether purposeful or not, you have had prior mentors in the past. Think about people who have mentored you and the qualities that you appreciated most about them. Use these traits as barometers in determining the traits you desire in your new mentor.

It is essential that you understand that the responsibility for your growth and development belongs to you, not your mentor. It is up to you to identify personal and business objectives such as work/life balance, professional presence, career advancement, and business development. You must also be careful not to assume that your mentor will be more actively involved than he or she is able. If you set unrealistic expectations, you and your mentor may be frustrated and disappointed.

Finding the right mentor may not be easy. However, your search is worth the effort. The payoff is huge. As someone who serves as a mentor and protégé, I strongly recommend the journey. My mentoring experiences (as both a mentor and protégé) have enhanced my personal and professional development, and increased my sense of confidence and capability.

About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.