

Career Guides:How Mentors Can Help You

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There are many advantages to having mentors in your life. They can teach you new skills, impart their knowledge and help you increase your self-confidence.

"Doors will also open to organizations and opportunities, and you'll have a shorter learning curve, because you are learning things faster than you would on your own," says Linda Phillips-Jones, PhD, principal consultant of The Mentoring Group in Grass Valley, California.

It's a mentor's market these days, and you need to have an edge over others seeking a potential mentor's advice. How do you find a mentor? And once you find one, what do you do next? Follow these six steps to finding mentors who can help you move your career in the right direction.

Build a Diverse Pool of Mentors

While there are advantages to having a mentor with a background similar to yours, you may be enriched by having a diverse pool of mentors. "You must be comfortable with the mentor, and sometimes comfort levels are increased if they are from your ethnic background. But it's not necessary for a successful mentor-protégé relationship," says Roger Campos, executive director of the Washington, DC-based Minority Business RoundTable.

Cindia Cameron, organizing director of the Atlanta branch of [9to5, National Association of Working Women](#) advises: "Talk to someone with a similar background and someone who is not from that background. You may get different suggestions and viewpoints."

Who should you approach? "Look at your peers, business associates, competitors and anyone out there you'd like to emulate," says Campos. "Choose people who are doing something well." Phillips-Jones suggests looking at previous bosses, teachers or someone who thought well of you.

Focus on Skills You Want to Develop or Improve

Choose mentors who can help you learn a new skill or gain additional knowledge of your profession. "In addition to working on a strength, target one or two areas of weakness you need to develop," says Cameron.

Work on Your Approach and Follow-Through

Think of the mentor-protégé relationship as a two-way street. You know why you want a mentor: Self-improvement. Now think of what you can offer to make your mentor's life better.

"Perhaps you could share information that the mentor wouldn't have access to, you'll also be able to," says Phillips-Jones. "You'll give the mentor positive reinforcement and recognition. Busy people often don't get a lot of compliments."

Once you've decided on a potential mentor, set up a meeting or telephone call to open the lines of communication and state your goals. "Make things as clear as you can so the person knows what information and help you want," says Phillips-Jones. If the first meeting goes well, ask if it would be possible to talk again, perhaps setting up monthly meetings.

Don't Ask for a Job or Access to Contacts

"Always be cautious and respectful in your first few meetings," advises Phillips-Jones. "A mentor must build trust and be comfortable with you before referring you to one of his contacts."

Be a Good Student and Follow Up

If your mentor makes a suggestion to you during your first encounter, use your second meeting as an opportunity to report back. For example, if your mentor suggested you read a *Wall Street Journal* article, talk about it and what you learned from it in your second meeting. That reinforces the relationship, according to Phillips-Jones.

Remember to Say Thank You

Send either a handwritten note or an email to thank your mentor for his time. Show your appreciation by recalling the important things you learned and how you're applying that knowledge to your career or life.

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