



Values Based Leadership

Developing Inspirational Leaders

Never be without a Mentor

by Karen Frost

Why you should have a Mentor

A Mentor is someone who takes an interest in your career and is able to give you the advice and support you need at key points in your career. During the fifteen years I have been a professional coach and mentor, I have noticed that it doesn't seem to matter what part of an economy you work in - or indeed where in the world you are based - the decision to find a mentor seems to enable people to make better decisions and ultimately become more successful in their jobs. In an overview of more than 100 mentoring surveys conducted by the East Mentors Forum, nearly half of all respondents reported that mentoring increased their opportunities for career advancement. Seventy-five per cent said the experience was positive, citing higher salaries and increased job satisfaction among the most tangible benefits.

For women in particular, the importance of having a mentor was further supported when I read *Beyond the Boys Club* by Suzanne Doyle-Morris, first published in 2009. Within the book, Suzanne emphasises that having a mentor is one of the fundamentals that help women progress in their career. She notes that women often don't seek out a mentor in their early years, with an inherent need to be self-sufficient.

In comparison, I have often found that men seek out an informal mentor early in their careers. The mentor is usually a successful and more senior man who is able to share experiences and steer the mentee away from career pit-falls.

When to get a Mentor and who it should be

I believe it is important to be proactive about getting yourself a mentor early in your career and learning how best to get the most from the relationship by making it a formal arrangement. This doesn't mean that you need to pay for a mentor. People in senior positions in organisations with good self-awareness and a desire to help others are often very willing to offer a few hours a year to support someone with their career aspirations without payment. So think about the people that you have in your network. They may be working in the same organisation as you, or they may be someone you have met in other aspects of your life. They need to be considered a positive role model to you and I would say that they need to be a good listener. Someone who comes to a mentoring meeting and talks predominately about themselves may have some good stories to tell, but unless they first seek to understand you, they are unlikely to offer the support you need.

The Mentor/Mentee Relationship

Once you have identified your potential mentor, then it is simply a matter of asking them if they would consider a mentor/mentee relationship. Most mentors I know feel privileged to be asked and will agree to it straightaway. However, if there is initial reticence, it will likely be due to concerns about the time commitment. It is your



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responsibility, as the mentee, to reassure them of what is involved. Here are a few suggestions of how you might approach this:

1. Offer to do the organising. Agree that you will contact them when you need a mentoring meeting and assure them that the meetings will only be 3 or 4 times a year.
2. Offer to go to them. Finding a location and environment convenient for them helps with time management and you are more likely to have a productive meeting.
3. Be clear on your objectives for mentoring. For example, let your Mentor know if you are seeking advice on your job, or balancing work and life. This will help them to have confidence that you are asking for support and advice in areas that they are familiar with.
4. Be prepared for mentoring meetings. It may be useful to give your mentor an update of activities and events since the last meeting. You may also consider providing a short agenda to include the areas you wish to talk about.
5. Agree the maximum length of time you are asking them to be a mentor for. I would recommend a year with a review after six months. In my experience, mentoring relationships that are set for a year give both parties the full understanding that the relationship is finite. If the relationship is working after one year, often they are re-contracted for another year. The key is that the relationship needs to be valuable for both of you.

Whilst I wouldn't suggest going as far as a formal mentoring agreement, it is my experience that mentoring relationships which have a psychological contract are the most successful. What I mean by this is that there is a conversation at the beginning of a

mentoring relationship which defines the relationship as formal, sets a time frame and agrees some form of structure. So talking through the 5 points above would start to develop that psychological contract. In addition, agreeing the content of the four statements below for both mentor and mentee will also formalise this relationship and maximise potential success:

Things I will do	Things I will not do
Things I can do	Things I cannot do

It is always beneficial to have a mentor. Even for senior leaders, who may find a peer mentor is just as valuable as a role model mentor. This would likely be someone outside your sphere of influence who can listen to you, offer support and advice if you ask for it and be non-judgemental. The mutual support a mentor offers can certainly help improve the decision making at critical points when you most need it. So, wherever you are in your career, never be without a mentor.



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