Life Kit

The right mentor can change your career. Here's how to find one

Updated December 21, 2022 · 12:17 PM ET

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Amy Matsushita-Beal for NPR

Imagine this: Someone you admire sets aside time to meet with you. They share how they accomplished their goals. And over time, they cheer you on and give you feedback and advice. Sounds pretty great, right? That is what we call a mentor.

The right mentoring relationship can be a powerful tool for professional growth — it can lead to new career opportunities, a promotion, even a better work-life balance.

One of the trickiest things about mentoring, though, is that it often happens informally. And that can make it difficult to find an entry point.

Since women and people of color face discrimination at higher rates than white men do in certain fields like STEM, it can be especially helpful for women and people of color to know how to intentionally seek out mentors.

Here's how to find a good mentor, officially make the ask and make it work.

1. Finding the Right Mentor

Know your goals (both short and long-term). What do you want to accomplish professionally in the next three months? Can you do it in your current role or will it require you to switch jobs? The more specific you are with your goals, the easier it will be to find the right mentor. One strategy to create effective, easily-achievable goals is to work "SMART," meaning your goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. (Here's a tipsheet all about crafting your own SMART goals.) Envisioning your dreams this way allows you to break down lofty ideas into individual goals that are easier to accomplish through short-term steps.

Sponsor Message

Ask yourself who you look up to. Whose job would you like to have in the next five, 10 or 15 years? Is this person inside or outside your workplace? Who is your immediate role model where you work? Keep a running list of the jobs and people you are visualizing. Consider an identity-based mentor in your organization, especially if you need to talk about issues you're facing as an underrepresented person in your professional surroundings.

Do the research. You may or may not be able to ask one of those people to be your mentor, but what are the stepping stones to get to someone in a similar position? Take notes on the path that person took to get to where they are today.

Be cognizant of your existing network. The more aware someone already is of your work and abilities, the more effective they will be at mentoring you. Think about whether someone is already informally mentoring you — can you ask them to help you? If someone isn't aware of your work or you've never talked to them, look for a connection. Make sure the person you are thinking about also has the expertise you're looking for. (We'll talk more about this in the next section.)

Sponsor Message

Recognize the difference between a mentor and a sponsor. For example, mentors give advice on but can't give you a new job, raise, or promotion. In contrast, sponsors can do that for you. They can be a boss, recruiter, or even employer in a new industry. Don't expect mentors to be sponsors, but they can put you in touch with sponsors. Mentors can also be in your life for the long run, while sponsors are often more short-term.

2. Making the Ask to a potential mentor

Have an elevator pitch ready. Be clear about your goals and why you think this person is the right mentor for you. Be upfront about the time commitment — what you're willing to put into the relationship and what you expect from them. If you're clear about what you need from the start, communication will flow smoothly. You can even practice this elevator pitch to other people before asking the possible mentor.

Make sure it's the right fit before asking. You can feel this out by having informal meetings where you discuss your goals and trajectory, before asking them to be your mentor.

Mention what you like about the person's work, especially if you've never met. Say your boss introduced you to a possible mentor and neither of you knows the other. Do your research about the possible mentor's work. Then open with what you like about their work. That will show that you have a thoughtful approach.

If it's a cold email, it's OK to start with the informational interview ask. But again, be specific about what you like about the person's work and why you want to meet. Why is talking to you worth their time? If you've never met before, consider starting with a phone call and work with the person's schedule. Keep in mind that informational interview requests are common. The way you stand out, as we mentioned before, is by showing you did the research about their career and by being specific and honest about what you're asking of them.

Before COVID-19, asking for mentorship was best in person. Video is just fine now. When you feel someone is the right fit, do your best to make the ask with more than just a phone call or email. It shows that you will be open to feedback in the long term.

Here are some things to mention:

- Tell them specifically what you've gotten out of past conversations with them. (This might be from that first informal meeting.)
- Be clear about how often you want to meet for and how long, and make sure it works for them. (You can reassess this later in the relationship.)
- Mention you'll put together agendas that align with the goals discussed above prior to each meeting.
- Finally, make sure they are considering this mentorship as an option and not an obligation. We're all busy, and you should approach the ask fully aware they might say no. And that's OK! If they do say no, mention you admire their path and thank them for considering. That leaves the door open for a future relationship.

3. Tips on Being a Good Mentee

So you've found the right mentor. Now what?

Amy Matsushita-Beal

Remember your goals. If you mention your specific, achievable goals from the beginning of the relationship, your mentor can help you stay on track at each meeting.

Meet consistently. Figure out how often you want to meet (i.e. once a week or once a month over four to six months), how long you want to meet for (i.e. half an hour or one hour) and how you want to meet — and make it consistent. Video conference is a good start so that you can get to know each other better. Gradually progress to phone calls once you're comfortable. Decide whether you or your mentor want to send out calendar invites to protect the time you plan to meet. This might mean keeping your supervisor in the loop.

Set an agenda. Before each meeting, send your mentor an agenda — a piece you may want to read with your mentor, a new project you've worked on and want feedback on or indicate that you're trying to ask for a promotion or raise.

Be open to feedback: positive or constructive. Sometimes it can be hard to take a compliment or look back and appreciate your own work. In the same vein, be open to hearing tough feedback.

Take notes as you're meeting so that you can follow up via email. That will help a busy mentor stay on track and know what to focus on with you over the course of your relationship.

Decide on an end date. Based on how long those short-term goals will take to achieve, decide how long you want the mentorship relationship to last. A good rule of thumb is usually four to six months, with the option to keep meeting informally.

Remember that this relationship is not a therapy session. Remember to make and keep boundaries. We're human, and often personal issues will come into play during your sessions, especially if you have a pre-existing relationship or are talking about work-life balance. It's okay to vent. But make sure not to monopolize the session with personal issues or make it only about venting.

Finally, consider establishing a board of mentors. No one mentor can help you achieve all of your goals. Maybe one mentor can help you consider a path to leadership because they are a supervisor. Maybe another can help with technical skills specific to making a job change. Another mentor may be aware of your skillset and could turn into a sponsor down the line. There is no right or wrong number of mentors as you progress through your professional career. Even if a formal mentorship period ends, keep these mentors in your life and updated on your achievements and pitfalls. They can be a guide when you're unsure and will feel appreciated that they helped you get to the place you're at in your career. Win-win!

Some mentorships will end, based on where each person is in life. Don't feel guilty, but close the loop respectfully. And remember to take care of yourself, above all else. Good luck!

Anjuli Sastry is the co-founder of NPR's Women of Color mentorship program, which has paired up more than 100 NPR employees for mentoring. Sastry was also a member of the inaugural ONA Mentorship Collaborative. She spoke about mentorship at Werk It: A Women's Podcast Festival in Los Angeles in October 2019. Hear her talk here.

The podcast portion of this story was produced by Andee Tagle.

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