

How To Be A Great Mentor



The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. - William Arthur Ward

Have you employed a mentor to help you navigate the professional world? Maybe you found her during your first job search; perhaps it was when you transitioned careers. Either way—your mentor most likely provided guidance and helped you overcome challenges. And if you're really lucky, she inspired you along the way.

According to [David Parnell](#), a legal consultant, communication coach and author, when it comes to mentorship, it is an unwritten rule that "one should give back at least what they've received."

So, if you've ever had a mentor, you might want to think about paying it forward.

"Mentoring—or at minimum connecting with a variety of people in all industries and age groups—has never been more important," says [Pamela Ryckman](#), author of *Stiletto Network: Inside the Women's Power Circles That Are Changing the Face of Business*.

But it's a big responsibility.

A mentor must believe in her mentee, both personally and professionally, Ryckman explains. "Mentors help fill your knowledge gaps and seek opportunities to help you grow and excel. A mentor is someone with whom you can let down your guard, share your insecurities, and ask the 'stupid' questions we all have sometimes."

A great mentor also sees her mentee as a person, not just an employee. She knows enough about their personal life to understand the external factors that impact their work, and cares about their happiness. "A [great] mentor is honest and unafraid to tell you hard truths about yourself and your work," Ryckman adds. "She helps you navigate the politics of your organization or profession, and avoid the land mines. She pushes you to take risks and aim higher, and advocates for you when you're not there."

There's a lot of personal satisfaction that comes from watching someone you care about reach his full potential. But as it turns out, mentoring goes far beyond that.

"Helping someone else succeed can be immensely gratifying," Ryckman says. "But what I've heard time and again from executive 'elders' is how much they gain in return when they mentor young people. They're often surprised at how much they learn from their mentees. Mentoring really goes both ways; when different generations come together, their blend of skills can be highly complementary."

Ryan Kahn, a career coach, founder of [The Hired Group](#), star of MTV's *Hired*, and author of *Hired! The Guide for the Recent Grad*, adds: "By investing in others you're also investing in yourself. For example, as you move forward in your career, you'll need to be able to identify and recruit fresh talent. Having a strong network of mentees can help you find and grow these rising stars."

Want to become a great mentor? Here are 9 things you'll need to do:

Always play both roles. Ideally, one would never have to make the transition from mentee to mentor, Ryckman says. "We should all be learning from others (playing the mentee role) and teaching others (being the mentor) throughout our careers."

Be committed. Being a mentor is a commitment, Kahn says. "If you're offering to help someone you need to follow through with that promise by being there for them when needed."

Know that your mentee can be anyone, anywhere. "Mentoring needn't follow the traditional 'elder-upstart' prescription anymore. It can be peer-to-peer across functions or industries," Rychman says. "It's about supplementing skill gaps and helping each person learn and grow."

As a mentor, you're someone who knows something your mentee doesn't, and you care enough to help them learn and succeed.

"Today, industries overlap and are interdependent in ways that were inconceivable a decade ago, and employees can no longer afford to stay stuck in a particular silo, oblivious to developments in other fields," she says. "Companies have realized that when people from different backgrounds with varying skills convene to debate and brainstorm, advances occur. In the 'new,' conceptual economy, the ability to draw knowledge from diverse spheres is prized."

Listen. One of your jobs as a mentor is to provide advice and encouragement, but in order to do so, you need to make the time to listen and understand the situation, Kahn says.

"Intently listening to a mentee as they vent and, ideally, sort their way through confusion, is often more than enough to get them through the day," Parnell says. "If you ask any therapist about the power of listening, they will tell you the same thing: It is massive. Any mentor that is worth their weight spends considerably more time listening than they do speaking."

Have your own mentor(s) and network. Today, the most successful people build relationships and gather intelligence from a wide variety of experts in all industries and age brackets, Rychman says. "People who are insular—who always return to the same small circle for advice and support—become closed off from opportunities." In order to be the very best mentor, you need to continue building your network and taking advice from those you trust.

Be open-minded and compassionate. "If you've ever argued with someone, you know that they will never see your side until they're convinced that you've seen theirs," Parnell says. "And to provide valuable guidance and advice that is well received, it is necessary to first understand the mentee's needs, wants, feelings, et cetera. This can only come in the form of deep and implicit empathy."

Have patience. Much like parenting, mentoring can be a satisfying, but also long-term and trying, endeavor, Parnell says. "While the mentee needs and wants direction, often times this requires a bit of constructive criticism, which can be hard to take. It is vital that a mentor be a patient soul, because tempers may flare, and quick fixes are few and far between."

Be a role model. As a mentor, your actions are being evaluated, so you must set the bar for yourself just as high, or higher, than you'd expect from your mentee, Kahn says.

"Your goal is to not only provide direction and advice, but to get your mentee to act upon them," Parnell adds. "And while conversations can be motivating, few things are more impactful than to lead by example. A mentor's mantra must be: 'Do as I do, not just as I say.'"

Care about the relationship. “Invest yourself in your mentee and you’ll get so much more out of the experience,” Kahn says.

“Mentees are usually eager, invested, and can be a bit vulnerable, leaving them to hang on your words and to pay close attention to, well, everything you do,” Parnell says. “Few things are more demotivating than ‘phoning in’ your time and efforts; it takes a sincere interest in the betterment of your mentee to avoid this. So, if you can’t muster a sincere desire right from the beginning, you’ll do better to find a more suitable fit, because you may do more harm than good,” he concludes.

—

Jacquelyn Smith, Forbes Staff

Leadership 5/17/2013

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2013/05/17/how-to-become-a-great-mentor/>