

Mentoring

A Mutually Beneficial Partnership

Do you want to move your career forward?

Would you like to develop your leadership skills as well as help others learn, grow, and improve their skills? Or would you like to find someone who can help you do these things?

You can. Through a mentoring partnership.

More professionals these days are actively pursuing mentoring to advance their careers. And whether you're on the giving or receiving end, these types of partnerships can benefit your career.

A mentoring partnership can be rewarding to both people, personally and professionally. It's an opportunity to develop communication skills, expand your viewpoints, and consider new ways of approaching situations. And both partners can advance their careers in the process.

In this article, we'll look at what mentoring is, and discuss the reasons why you might enter into a mentoring partnership. Should you offer to help others, or ask for help from someone – or both? We'll also explain how mentoring differs from other types of professional career development relationships.

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a relationship between two people with the goal of professional and personal development. The "mentor" is usually an experienced individual who shares knowledge, experience, and advice with a less experienced person, or "mentee."

Mentors become trusted advisers and role models – people who have "been there" and "done that." They support and encourage their mentees by offering suggestions and knowledge, both general and specific. The goal is help mentees improve their skills and, hopefully, advance their careers.

A mentoring partnership may be between two people within the same company, same industry, or same networking organization. However the partners come together, the relationship should be based on mutual trust and respect, and it typically offers personal and professional advantages for both parties.

Mentoring and Other Professional Relationships

Coaches, trainers, and consultants can all help you learn and grow professionally. Mentoring is a unique combination of all of these. Let's explore some of the similarities and differences between mentoring and these other professions.

- **Coaches** help you to explore where you are in your career, where you want to go, and how you might get there. A coach will also support you in taking action to move toward your goal.

Coaches and mentors differ in three main ways. First, a coach is generally paid, whereas your mentor will usually be making a voluntary commitment. This means that you can start working with a coach straight away, and that you can rely them not to cancel sessions because "Something urgent's come up". Finding a mentor can take longer, and even when you do, your mentor may find it harder to keep space in their day for your mentoring appointment.

Second, while coaches tend to guide you in mapping out your future, mentors actually suggest several paths you might take, although the choice of where to go next remains yours.

Beyond that, of course, good coaches are professionally trained and qualified, so you can rely on getting a high-quality service from them. They also bring their experience of helping other people with career and life issues similar to those that you're facing.

- **Trainers** help you learn and develop specific skills and knowledge. They typically set the topic, the pace, the goals, and the learning method. While you will obviously choose courses that match your requirements as closely as possible, training courses, by their nature, start with their own agendas rather than with your situation.

Mentoring, however, can be tailored to your needs. While training is often best suited for gaining knowledge and skills, mentoring can also help you develop personal qualities and competencies.

- **Career Consultants or Career Counsellors** mostly work with people in transition between jobs, rather than helping you develop your skills when in a particular role. And, again, your relationship will often be a commercial one.

Benefits to the Mentor

Becoming a mentor can enrich your life on a personal and professional level by helping you do the following:

- **Build your leadership skills** – It helps you develop your ability to motivate and encourage others. This can help you become a better manager, employee, and team member.
- **Improve your communication skills** – Because your mentee may come from a different background or environment, the two of you may not "speak the same language." This may force you to find a way to communicate more effectively as you navigate your way through the mentoring relationship.
- **Learn new perspectives** – By working with someone less experienced and from a different background, you can gain a fresh perspective on things and learn a new way of thinking – which can help in your work life as well as your personal life.
- **Advance your career** – Refining your leadership skills can strengthen your on-the-job performance, perhaps helping you get that promotion to higher management – or into management in the first place. Showing that you've helped others learn and grow is becoming more and more essential to advancement in today's business world.
- **Gain personal satisfaction** – It can be very personally fulfilling to know that you've directly contributed to someone's growth and development. Seeing your mentee succeed as result of your input is a reward in itself.

Benefits to the Mentee

A trusted mentor can help you do the following:

- **Gain valuable advice** – Mentors can offer valuable insight into what it takes to get ahead. They can be your guide and "sounding board" for ideas, helping you decide on the best course of action in difficult situations. You may learn shortcuts that help you work more effectively and avoid "reinventing the wheel."
- **Develop your knowledge and skills** – They can help you identify the skills and expertise you need to succeed. They may teach you what you need to know, or advise you on where to go for the information you need.
- **Improve your communication skills** – Just like your mentor, you may also learn to communicate more effectively, which can further help you at work.
- **Learn new perspectives** – Again, you can learn new ways of thinking from your mentor, just as your mentor can learn from you.

- **Build your network** – Your mentor can offer an opportunity to expand your existing network of personal and professional contacts.
- **Advance your career** – A mentor helps you stay focused and on track in your career through advice, skills development, networking, and so on.

Mutual Mentoring

It's often the case that, within an organization or a network, there are more people looking for a mentor than there are those offering to be one. A practical solution to this is "mutual mentoring".

Although it is probably useful to have a mentor who has "been there, and done that", you might have to wait a long time for such a person to come along. Instead, why not try working with a less-experienced but willing person, who will still be able to encourage you to think about what you want from your career, challenge you to commit to goals, and help you to review your progress towards them?

If you do the same for them, you have the basis for a strong and mutually-beneficial relationship.

Key Points

Mentoring partnerships can be mutually beneficial and rewarding – on both professional and personal levels. Mentors can develop leadership skills and gain a personal sense of satisfaction from knowing that they've helped someone.

Mentees can expand their knowledge and skills, gain valuable advice from a more experienced person, and build their professional networks. And both partners can improve their communication skills, learn new ways of thinking, and, ultimately, advance their careers.

Mentoring relationships can be mutual, or two-way, with each person being both the mentor of and mentee of the other person. Alternatively, they can be one way only, although an individual may have his or her own mentor while also acting as mentor for others at the same time.

Mind Tools