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Maximize Your Mentor Relationship

by Shanene Pinder

To compete and succeed in today's fast-paced business world, what you need – in addition to a good education and marketable qualifications – is a mentor. An effective mentor can make the difference in how well you navigate through and advance your professional career. A productive mentorship is a wonderful opportunity to learn invaluable lessons about handling office politics, networking, managing projects and staff, refining your professionalism, and balancing work with family life.

Always remember that mentoring is a two-way street. It is a relationship that provides the environment for both you and your mentor to learn from each other, and offers the possibility of forging a lifelong friendship or professional collaboration built on trust and mutual respect. So don't be in awe of your mentor and his or her status. They may be very successful and accomplished, but understand that, just as they are helping you develop, you are contributing to their growth as well.

As a mentee there are many benefits to being under the wing of a mentor. Working with an experienced advisor can bring you a clearer career plan, higher visibility in your industry, an increased knowledge of intricate aspects of your business, greater pleasure in your work, increased productivity (which generates higher income), and builds your support network for professional growth and future career opportunities.

An attentive and observant mentor can also help you identify your strengths and talents. They may see opportunities that you could easily have missed.

Find the Right Mentor

In any relationship the right match is key. To make sure you don't get stuck with a mismatch, you should carefully consider what you are looking for. It makes it a lot easier to select a mentor who can provide specific direction if you

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have identified those particular areas where you need help or would like to develop.



Terrie M. Williams (*left*), successful entrepreneur, inspirational author, mentor, and founder of The Stay Strong Foundation (terriewilliams.com), said, “Having mentored countless youth over the years, I always appreciate it when a young person who approaches me for a mentorship comes prepared with a game plan of what they hope to learn and are clear about their objectives. It is not necessarily required, but that extra effort helps me help them by enabling me to provide more strategic guidance, and it results in a more successful experience.”

To find a great mentor look for someone who is reliable, professional, knowledgeable, experienced, and patient. You will be spending a lot of time with your counselor and trusting him or her to teach you things that will affect your ability to thrive in your chosen profession. Here are a few practices that have worked for me:

- **Take the initiative.** Professionals have busy lives, so it works to your benefit to reach out to them and express your interest in a mentorship with them.
- **Be visible.** Sometimes, a mentor can be found in an unexpected situation. Step beyond your routine to attend seminars, conferences, and events at the office, on campus, and in your community. As you learn new information or skills you expose yourself to a broader range of people who could potentially become your mentors.
- **Commit to your industry.** Join professional associations and tap into your college alumni resources. As your participation increases and your dedication shows, you might attract the interest of seasoned professionals who will reward you for “paying your dues” with their attention and guidance.
- **Do your homework.** Research local and national organizations, internship programs through your school, and Web sites that lead you to useful resources.
- **Talk about it.** Tell your family, friends, colleagues, and professors about your career aspirations and your desire for a mentor. Any of them could point you towards a prospective counselor.

You might choose to have just one mentor, but you should consider adding more. Instead of seeking out one advisor, expand your network to include several of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds that can provide support and wisdom in a variety of areas of expertise. If you have a mentor from a different culture or of the opposite sex, take the opportunity to see things from a new perspective. Learn about his or her culture, and ask if they can provide unique insight on any business-related challenges they have overcome.

Be a Great Mentee

Once you begin a mentorship, make it meaningful for yourself and your mentor. While the benefits of a mentorship flow as a give and take, it’s really up to you to make the relationship worthwhile. You must take responsibility for your growth and stand out as a great mentee.

Your mentorship will be a better experience if you are prepared. Work with your mentor to develop a structured learning plan. Discuss your specific objectives, their achievability, and evaluation criteria. Together, determine the

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accomplishments, duties, projects, or competencies that you will need to execute or learn, as well as the frequency and style of interaction. Create a schedule and then put the plan in writing. This will help you manage each other's expectations and ensure that you are both on the same page during your mentorship.

Although you intend to gain experience, increase your knowledge, and be exposed to new resources through your mentor, you must also think about what you have to offer. This is your time to shine. Ask how you can help, apply your skills wherever possible, and share your ideas.



Alvin Gay (*left*), CEO and managing partner, Footsteps Group (footstepsgroup.com) said, "At the office, I'm very busy and moving at lightning speed. If my mentee is able to see what's needed and has learned how to step in to help me, it just makes things a lot easier. In turn, it affords me more time to focus extra attention on their development."

In addition to the skills you learn and bring to the experience, there are certain characteristics that are critical to your success. It's important to be professional, maintain confidentiality regarding both professional and personal matters, and respect your mentor and his or her time. You can demonstrate how earnest you are by projecting a positive attitude, receiving criticism well, accepting responsibility and accountability for your work, and being punctual for all meetings.

As you become more familiar with your mentor, work hard to maintain the relationship. Remember that your mentor is not just an advisor; he or she is a human being with a life beyond the office. Show a genuine desire in getting to know them as a person, initiate reasonably frequent contact as mutually agreed upon, notice and address their interests, and most importantly, express appreciation for your mentor's help. Your mentorship is an opportunity for you to forge what could become a lifelong bond.

Moving On

A mentorship can span a lifetime or may only last for a limited season in time. Some result in a productive and impactful experience that evolves into a lasting friendship. Others might simply run their course, and some may even hit a few snags that raise the red flag that it's time to move on.

There are common pitfalls that may or may not occur during your mentorship. However, you need to know how to recognize and react to unexpected problems should they arise. You know your mentorship is not working if you often feel disrespected, devalued, experience communication problems, lack passion or basic competency for the work, or are not making a solid connection with your mentor. Try having an honest and open conversation with your mentor about your concerns, but if that doesn't work it may be time to go your separate ways.

When it's time to discontinue a difficult mentorship, don't burn your bridges. Make your exit in the most respectful manner possible. That means expressing your gratitude and having the courtesy to notify your mentor in advance. He or she will appreciate your grace and it will allow them to smoothly reassign the projects you were managing to someone else.

Once you've reached the end of a positive mentorship, make sure you give your mentor their props. He or she has invested a great deal of their time, teaching, and resources preparing you to take your game to the next level. It's time to honor that.

You can show your appreciation by taking your mentor out to lunch or dinner, bringing a thoughtful gift, and sharing the key learnings that have resonated with you. This is a great way to bring closure to the experience, or to express your interest in continuing the friendship. It also makes your mentor feel respected and lets them know that they've made a difference – something they would appreciate.

Pay it Forward by Giving Back

While you are receiving the benefits of a great mentorship, share the lessons you learn with others. Never forget what it's like to need and then find a special, generous person committed to helping you become a better person by providing you with the tools to realize your dreams. Just like you, there are countless young men and women who have aspirations and need a guide they can trust to show them how to reach their goals. Now, you have the opportunity to be the angel on someone else's shoulder. This is the circle of support that is needed to help the community grow stronger.



Christopher D. Cathcart (*left*), president and founder of OneDiaspora Group (onediaspora.com), reflected, "I'll never forget my first mentor. He was dedicated and always took the time to answer my questions or show me the way to do things in the business world. Just having someone care about my development so much and consistently be there for me changed my life. We are still friends today, mentoring each other. And I've answered the call to become a mentor, too. It's one of the most rewarding choices I've ever made."

Making the decision to become a mentor is an admirable way to come full circle and give back. You have the power to take a young person under your wing and make a difference in their future. And there are benefits for you. Through your dedication you will improve your communication and leadership skills, contribute to the growth and development of your community, and enjoy the personal satisfaction of helping create a brighter future for others.

As you enter the cycle of learning and teaching be prepared for some of the greatest experiences of your life. And as you move forward in your profession, remember to bring a young person along. I know for sure that as you bless others, you will be blessed right back.

10 MENTORING RESOURCES

Check out these great sites for information about finding or becoming a mentor:

- 1. ESSENCE Cares**

essence.com/essence/emf/essencecares

- 2. Mentor**

mentoring.org

3. The Stay Strong Foundation

thestaystrongfoundation.com

4. Big Brothers Big Sisters

bbs.org

5. 100 Black Men of America, Inc.

100blackmen.org

6. The Links, Incorporated

linksinc.org

7. National Urban League

nul.org/educationandyouth

8. National Coalition of 100 Black Women

ncbw.org

9. NAACP

naacp.org/programs/youth

10. MANifest Your Destiny Foundation

manifestyourdestiny.net



Shanene Pinder, founder of Shanene Pinder, LLC, a writing and editing services company, is co-authoring a book about mentoring with Terrie M. Williams. She holds a B.A. in Communications from The City College of New York and lives in New York City.



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