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Dec - 12

Why You Need a Mentor and How to Find One

By Michael "Dr. Woody" Woodward



In Greek mythology, the character Mentor (often the goddess Athena in disguise) was the trusted guardian Odysseus appointed to watch over his son Telemachus when he departed for the Trojan War. The pivotal role Mentor played in the development of the young Telemachus inspired the notion of mentoring, a term that first became popular in the 18th Century, and has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity due to the weak labor market.

Both employees and job seekers can use mentors to become a better, more productive worker and learn the ropes of a new industry. Mentors are able to share the good and bad of their past experiences to help you make informed choices. Consider that a study conducted by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) found that 75% of executives attribute their success in-part to having a mentor. The study also found that 71% of Fortune 500 companies have some type of internal mentoring program.

Selecting a Mentor

Choosing the right mentor is about finding a proper fit. First you should seek someone whose past experiences align with your future ambitions. Look for someone who has gone down a similar path to the one you are seeking and is willing to openly share the experiences of their journey.

It's also important to feel comfortable with your mentor, after all, the relationship has to be open and honest in order to be effective. When establishing a mentoring relationship always be upfront about your expectations and ambitions. Let your mentor know where you are trying to go with your career and what is driving your ambitions.

Your mentor should not be someone you report to – that will complicate the relationship and only serve to limit the scope of what you can honestly discuss. The best and most effective mentor/mentee relationship is one that is self-selected and mutually beneficial. Seek out a mentor who not only has the requisite knowledge and experience for helping you succeed, but one who also has an interest in being a part of your success. Often the mentor is merely looking to pass along his or her knowledge and experience in return for that feeling of satisfaction in helping a young protégé succeed. Be sure to understand how you can best meet that need.

Role of a Mentor

Mentors often play a role in helping navigate the internal politics of an organization or industry. Political gaming and posturing within an industry isn't something easily learned on your own, and working with a mentor can give you a leg-up in spotting the political land mines that often derail fledgling careers.

A mentor also can provide tremendous value as a sounding board when it comes to testing new ideas or considering how to approach a touchy office situation. The idea

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is to leverage your mentor's knowledge and experience as a tool for making good decisions.

Being a Good Protégé

As a mentee, it is up to you to drive the relationship. Your mentor is not your manager. The burden should always be on you to take the initiative in arranging meetings, setting goals, and asking the right questions. Try to keep your interactions conversational and not too structured. You want the relationship to be somewhat casual, so as to allow for a free

flow of thoughts and ideas. Be sure to listen to the mentor's ideas and be willing to try out some of what he or she recommends.

We are all victims of living in our

own heads and it often takes an outsider to give us that well-needed dose of reality. A good mentor can be tremendous advantage in enhancing your career opportunities if you are willing to build and foster the relationship in a way that is mutually beneficial and aligned with your career goals. Commit the time and go find yourself a good mentor!

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