

THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Mentors

By Olivia Fox Cabane

Did you ever notice how many successful business people had mentors? Warren Buffet had Benjamin Graham. Jack Welch had Scott McNealy. And Eliza Doolittle had Henry Higgins. The history of mentoring reaches back to Homer's Telemachus and Mentor (though the latter set a rather poor example).

Mentors are people who can guide you, advise you, and share their experiences and their mistakes so you won't make the same ones. By visibly endorsing you, they can give you credibility; by bringing you to events with them, you'll gain visibility; and by introducing you to their contacts, they'll give you access. Visibility, credibility, and access — mentors are important indeed.

Many law firms are starting to realize the importance of mentoring. Some have even implemented formal internal mentoring programs, which you should definitely take advantage of. But however laudable their initiative, the programs will never be as tailored to your needs as if you choose your mentors yourself.

DECIDE AND SELECT

First you need to know what you want to achieve. In which field do you need contacts? In which area would you like to be known? Who are the leaders in this area? Is there someone you'd like to emulate? Keep in mind that mentors come in all shapes and sizes, and that the diversity of your mentors, just like the diversity of your network, can be a tremendous asset.

You can have mentors for various industries or aspects of life: A mentor for the pharmaceutical industry, a mentor within the legal profession, a mentor for work-life balance, a mentor

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for marathon training, and so on. For any aspect of your life you would like to improve, you can find a mentor.

When searching for potential candidates, start by combing through your address book and see if there's anyone in there who could be a mentor, or who might know someone who could be a good mentor. No need for them to be close friends already — you can work on it as you go along.

APPROACH

Once you've selected a dozen targets, begin a personal campaign around each one of these individuals. First, you need knowledge. What do they care about? What do they want to achieve? What do they worry about? Where do they spend their time? Some of this information you may know yourself; some you may ask people you know; some, you will find on Google.

There are many ways of going after a target. For instance, you can use the committees of organizations you belong to. In the search for mentors, the two best committees to join are *Events/Programming* and *Nominating/Election*. The main purpose of these committees is to research and evaluate potential speakers and board members, which are usually prominent individuals. If the committee decides to invite these people for a speaking engagement or a board membership, you have a very flattering reason to contact them. And thanks to the committee's research, you know exactly you have in common with each, which is a great way to start a solid business relationship. If they don't make the cut, you've still gained an edge; thanks to the research, you're more likely to meet them since you now know which causes they patronize and which events they attend. And when you do meet them, you know exactly what the two of you have in common.

You can also approach them directly at events — through Google, find out which events they're most likely to attend. You can then contact them before the event, and offer to

take them to lunch to discuss a subject that you know is close to their heart. If the topic is titillating enough, they will accept. Or you can arrive at the event early enough to be able to help out — and you can chat with the greeters or hosts while you help set up, which gives you a perfect opportunity to ask them to introduce you to your targets. Or, if they're a speaker, you can try to make contact just before their program; every speaker, no matter how seasoned, gets a bit nervous before they go up on stage, and will be grateful for your warm welcome.

One of our clients had as a target the CEO of a certain firm. Through Google, we found out which charities and organizations the target belonged to, and what his affiliations, sports, hobbies, and career history were. He combed through his network (and asked his friends and colleagues to comb through theirs) to find a point of connection: a common school, church, or charity where he knew someone already. Thus, he eventually found out that the CEO was on the same school board as his brother-in-law. After that, it was just a matter of requesting an introduction.

OFFER

Once you've made contact, it's up to you to prove your worth. What do you have to offer? One of the most effective networking techniques is *referrals* — send some business to the person you most want to meet. An alternative to referrals is *visibility* — do you belong to a trade organization which could invite this person to speak? You could also offer *credibility* if you have contacts at a university where you could have this person invited as guest lecturer. Do you have valuable *information* to share about a project they're working on? Do you know of a *resource* that would make their life easier?

You can send them clippings from newspapers or magazines that relate to their business, industry, or personal

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projects, along with a “thought you’d enjoy” note. Send them invitations to events you think would be of interest to them. If they’re in the news, send a copy of the article with a congratulatory note. Are you thinking that they must have received many such notes already? Actually, most people mean to, but tend forget to do it. You can also think of something for their kids. No matter how important someone gets, their children are sacred to them. Help the child, and the parent will never forget it.

ASK

At the same time, gradually draw them into your life. A good way to start is to ask them for their opinion and experience. People love to be seen as experts and share their knowledge — it makes them feel important. Start with brief emails and phone calls; then invite them for coffee, then ask them out to lunch. Do so on a regular basis, so that they get used to hearing from you.

Then, you can start asking for help. Are you afraid that asking for help will make them like you less? *Au contraire*. Asking someone for help will often result in them liking you *more*. Sounds crazy? It’s the result of a human tendency to cognitive resonance, also called simply rationalization. It describes our nearly obsessive desire to be and to

appear consistent with what we have already done. Once an action has been taken, the need for consistency pressures people to bring what they feel and believe into line with what they have already done. They simply convince themselves that they had made the right choice. When someone does something good for someone out of their own free will, they have two ways of thinking about it:

I helped someone I don’t like & who isn’t worth it. I must be really stupid. (*How likely is this thought to be favored?*)

I helped someone I like and who is worth it. Of course that’s why I did it — I wouldn’t have helped them otherwise — I’m not stupid after all. *Far more agreeable to think of oneself, isn’t it?*

LISTEN AND IMPLEMENT

Now, if they go to all the trouble of giving you advice, you had better follow it and keep them up to date on the progress, or if you don’t follow it, give them a detailed explanation why not. For a mentor, there’s nothing worse than spending time and brainpower on a mentee, and then having to call them afterwards to check how things worked out, asking “so, did you do it?” and hearing “umm, not yet ... things are complicated.”

Do not — ever — blame them for any advice that goes awry. Blame just doesn’t work; again, rationalization at work. If they feel like they’ve done

you harm, they will seek to rationalize it to reduce cognitive dissonance. They don’t want to feel like a bad person, therefore you must’ve done something wrong in order for them to have done something bad to you. So avoid blaming them for hurting you — it actually harms you instead.

When their advice does go right, share the glory. Give them as much credit as you can — make them feel responsible for your success. Send thank-you notes, send flowers or chocolate, take them out to lunch. And use this as a building block to take the mentoring relationship one step higher.



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