

# How To Find A Mentor And Maximize The Relationship

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March 19, 2021

Mar 19, 2021, 06:20am EST | 45 views

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After a lecture ended, I walked up to the stage and asked Barbara Jones if I could pay her to edit my essays. It was noon on a summer weekday in Iowa City, and while I was at the Iowa Writers' Workshop summer program for poetry, I attended the daily 11 a.m. lectures by other instructors. This one had been about essay writing and given by the then editor of a nationally published magazine. I had nothing to lose by asking.

Barbara generously said sure, offering a price of \$10 per page for her insights. Thus began a years-long pre-internet relationship (it was 1998) where I mailed my typed essays to her New York City apartment, and she sent them back marked in red pen with copious notes to my suburban Detroit flat.

Maybe I grew as an essayist from that direction. I certainly grew as a person, for what began as a simple tutorial grew into a decades-long friendship with a woman I consider to be one of my greatest mentors.

Barbara moved along in her career, as I did in mine, and whenever we found ourselves in the same location, we met for a drink and a meal and talked long about life, family, relationships and work. I sent thank-you notes and gifts. She sent books she published for me to review. She imparted words of wisdom when I married and became a mother. I sought her perspective when the political landscape grew harried.

A mentor, by definition, is a person with more experience or knowledge who teaches and guides someone coming up in their field or community. A mentor can influence a person's growth, not only in their career, but in life. And in marketing or public relations, as in any field, finding and learning from mentors at every stage of your professional development is key to taking you where you want to go.

From 30 years of research, SAP found that mentoring relationships improve career outcomes, increase employee engagement and reduce corporate turnover. A 2019 survey by CNBC and SurveyMonkey showed that "workers are happiest when their jobs have meaning," and that those with mentors "are significantly more likely to be happy with their jobs." The survey also revealed that 91% of people who have a workplace mentor are satisfied with their jobs.

I can honestly say that mentors have made my career. Certainly, I did the hard work and imagination-inspired planning, but having the sound counsel of someone older, wiser and more accomplished than I am has been a saving grace again and again.

Barbara and I have now been connected for more than 20 years. I gained another mentor, Paul Saginaw, after an innocuous interview in 2007 when I was writing an article about the neighborhood where his business was located. I later contacted him to ask if we could meet for coffee so I could share an idea I had brewing. He agreed, and his sage advice helped steer me in the right direction.

That relationship, usually instigated by me with relentless gratitude and thank-yous sent his way, has grown into another personal-professional mentorship-friendship.

While these two mentorships continue on and have grown into mutually beneficial, two-way relationships, I've enjoyed others over the years that had a reason or a season. And mentorships have been so powerful for my career that I've passed along the gift by mentoring others.

If you haven't had the good fortune to encounter a mentor yet, here are some tips for finding one — and how to maximize the mentoring relationship.

- **Ask questions.** If someone is generous enough to give you their time and wisdom, pay close attention. Ask follow-up questions. Try not to talk about yourself too much, but rather soak up the knowledge they extend to you. Ask about their career, their work and how they've achieved and accomplished. Listen carefully so you can extract applicable nuggets that resonate in your life and work.

- **Approach the relationship with humility.** Mentors are usually busy people with many demands. They are generous with their time, but recognize how much they have going on and that they do not have to make time for you. With that in mind, a humble approach sets you up to build the relationship further than either of you can imagine.

• **Always send a thank-you note. And sometimes a gift.** I'm a big fan of the handwritten thank-you note, even in our technological era, for two reasons: First, people rarely receive mail these days, and second, it shows character and kindness. If you want to build a long-lasting mentorship relationship, showing the depths of your integrity is a good way to start. I always say thank you when someone gifts me their time and focus, and when it's above and beyond the normal quick coffee chat, I send a gift. Nothing over the top — but something that shows that I know the other person and I wish for them to know how deep my appreciation goes.

• **Offer to help in return.** After years of coffee chats and wondering email exchanges, I realized that I'd always been asking Paul for help and never had the opportunity to offer it. So I started to humbly offer that if I could in any way help him, all he had to do was ask. I wasn't sure what I could really offer to this accomplished, inspiring entrepreneur, but I figured it couldn't hurt to extend the offer. I meant it from the depths of my being. One day, he finally took me up on it and asked me to assess a website for one of his businesses — since he knew my marketing expertise included websites. After several hours of painstaking review, I sent detailed feedback and recommendations. That insight helped his business and eventually led to him hiring me to work with the business toward its growth. I didn't do it for the possibility of gaining a client; I did it to help someone I cherished.

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