

COACH *Notes*



**Stronger Performances
Through Mentoring**

The Information Age being what it is, there is no dearth of sources for information and expertise. We research online and offline. We listen to guest experts and watch educational programs. We read books, newsletters and magazines. We hire consultants.

But where do we go for ongoing wisdom? To whom do we turn for experienced advice to help us achieve stronger performance?

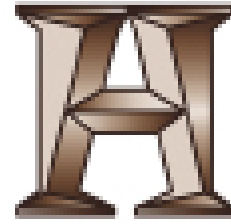
Increasingly in business, the answer is: mentors.

"Mentoring lets employees soak up character, judgment and approach," writes Micki Holliday, in the book *Coaching, Mentoring & Managing*. "It is the opportunity for them to apprise situations and cultivate their own ways."

This solution to the need for a certain flavor of guidance and learning is surprisingly ancient, having its roots in Homer's Greece. Mentor was the name of Odysseus' faithful friend who served as teacher and overseer for his son, Telemachus, when Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War.

To this day, mentors continue to serve as guides and teachers, providing a good, reliable sounding board, opportunity for a second opinion and, often, emotional

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support. We learn from their experience, their mistakes and their successes. And we often gain access to their (usually extensive) network of decision-makers.

Working with mentors is generally not only good for individuals but good for the company, as well.

“Now more than ever, and in most industries, human assets are of greater importance than physical and financial assets,” write the editors of the Harvard Business Essentials book *Coaching and Mentoring*. They make the case that neither physical nor financial assets differentiates companies nor confers a long-term competitive advantage, whereas human assets are the source on innovation and value creation. “Thus, organizations have a powerful economic incentive to develop their human assets.”

Finding a Mentor

Though mentors do provide a valuable source of objective feedback, the mentor-protégé relationship almost always best if it's a non-evaluative one. Within companies, this is done by working with a mentor from a different department. And while it may work best to look within your own business, mentors don't have to come from within a company, nor do you need to wait for an established corporate mentor program to begin benefiting from a mentor relationship. Consider this list of places to find a mentor.

Professional associations. If it's important to you to have a mentor within your industry, look to people you meet at professional association meetings.

Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE). This organization has helped many an entrepreneur with solid advice from those who've been there.

Your community. Consider former bosses or professors, relatives, networking group contacts, friends, church groups, etc.

Service organizations. Some groups, such as Rotary Club Int'l, offer business mentoring programs. Look around in your city; ask at your local Chamber of Commerce.

Others you admire or respect. Make a list of possible candidates before you begin your search.

Tending the Mentoring Relationship

It's important to be clear on your mentoring goals before proposing a mentor relationship with the person you've chosen. Mentors are usually interested in giving back to their community and/or they want to mentor in order to develop skills as a teacher, manager, strategist or consultant. But be considerate about your mentor's time. In fact, be considerate, period. Remember the adage that you get what you give. Buy your mentor some tea or pick up the lunch tab. Send her information she might consider useful for a pet project or offer help or services. Say thank you. Here are some other tips for working with a mentor.

Come prepared to your meeting. Take notes, develop action steps and review both before your next meeting.

Be clear about what you're doing and what you need. Keep to one or two specific, well-thought-out questions, and ask them clearly.

Spend most of your time listening. You'll get the most out of your mentor if you don't engage in “Why I can't do that” conversations. You are not obligated to put any of your mentor's suggestions into action, so just listen.

Be personal. Don't spend all your time picking your mentor's brain. Make your time with your mentor a conversation rather than a grilling. Be curious about your mentor's life. Don't idolize him or her.

Be real. You won't learn a fraction of what you could if you're trying to impress or skimming over problems.

Think for yourself. No mentor wants to figure everything out for you. Mentors should serve the role of guide, not parent.