



Walking with Giants: Finding a Mentor

By Karen Hinds

If you observe the animal kingdom, baby animals often walk in the shadow of their parents. They do this for protection and at the same time they are learning survival techniques. Why not adapt the same technique for your college and professional career? Find a "professional parent"—a mentor—and walk in their shadow for a bit.

Mentoring is simply a relationship where you are able to occasionally call, email, or visit with someone who is more knowledgeable than you are in a particular area. Notice I did not say someone who is older. Mentoring is not about age; it is about experience. Anyone with expertise that you lack qualifies to be a mentor, providing that person is willing to share their knowledge.

Mentors cut your learning curve and help you avoid a host of costly mistakes. There is no rule that says you can have only one mentor, and in fact it will be to your advantage to have a few mentor relationships that can help you grow in different areas of your personal and professional life.

Obtaining a mentor should not be difficult and the relationship does not always have to be a formal arrangement. In fact, many people seem to shy away from formal mentoring responsibilities because it seems like a tremendous commitment of time and resources. However, these same people are almost always open to answering quick questions.

So how do you find a mentor or mentors?

1. **Be clear about why you want a mentor.** Write down all the reasons you need a mentor and be able to articulate them. Think about what you would like to gain from the relationship as well.
2. **Know your preferred work style.** Think about your personality type and that of your mentor. Some mentors are very laid back and friendly; others can be very structured and formal. It's just a difference in personality work styles.
3. **Mentors are not perfect.** They are regular people willing to be a resource to help you learn. Your mentor can advise you, but making decisions should always be your responsibility.
4. **Describe who your ideal mentor would be.** Take into consideration the person's experience, qualifications and current position. Make a list of those qualities.
5. **Make a list of people who might fit your criteria.** We all would like a high-profile person as a mentor but don't get star-struck. Sometimes the best mentor is a dedicated, lesser-known individual who is genuinely interested and willing to help you achieve your goals, teach you something new, share their experiences, open doors for you or just support you and cheer you on in your endeavors.



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6. **Tell a few trusted people you are searching for a mentor.** They may be able to suggest a few possible people to you. If you see someone you think might fit your description of the ideal mentor, invite him or her to coffee or schedule an informational interview. During your meeting, ask that person if it's acceptable for you to call occasionally for advice. Most people will say yes, but if the person sounds hesitant, he could be uninterested or simply have too many other time commitments. Don't take it personally. Thank the person for his time and move on to the next person on your list. If the person says yes, great.
7. **Look at your school, community or company.** Find out if there is a formal mentoring program. If so, check to see if there are any prerequisites.
8. **Don't be a leech.** Although your mentor is supposed to help you, don't suck him dry of his time, talents and resources. Figure out what you can also offer your mentor so it becomes a mutually beneficial relationship. Be prepared, enthusiastic and show you understand and appreciate his time and information.

Of course, there may be times when you are not able to connect with a person directly. At those times, why not seek out the same expertise from books or even online social media sites? Books hold the same teachings and strategies you will need to succeed. Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and other social media sites are also excellent sources for mentors. These sites give you access to people and groups of experts that you would not ordinarily have been exposed to a few years ago and where you are able to ask questions directly.

If you are still unable to find a mentor, then seek out an exchange mentorship. It's a growing trend where two people agree to mentor each other in their respective areas of expertise. One individual might be very good at social media networking and the other person may be very good at managing people. In this scenario, both parties would agree to help each other grow professionally in these areas.

Remember, be kind to your mentors and always thank them graciously for sharing their expertise. For many people, it's quite an honor to be able to pour something into the life of another human being.



About the writer: Karen Hinds is a consultant, motivational speaker and Founder/CEO of Workplace Success Group and author of five books, including *Get Ahead: 101 Courtesies for the New Workplace*. Her company provides workforce development solutions to organizations committed to increasing the effectiveness of emerging leaders. Some of her clients include Frito-Lay, The Bank of New York Mellon, Turner Construction, Harvard Business School Executive Education Program, University of Connecticut, and the Northwest Regional Investment Board. She writes a weekly business column for an international newspaper and appears as a guest on radio and television programs. Learn more at <http://powerofdistinction.com/>