



KEYS TO FIND (And Make the Most of) YOUR PROFESSIONAL MENTOR

By Lei Wang

As a working professional, you have probably heard many stories of how other people credited their success to their mentors. Working with a mentor can truly pave the way to success in one's career, but oftentimes creating—and maintaining—the mentor-mentee relationship can be challenging. Maybe your company does not offer a formal mentorship program, or maybe you simply feel that you're not receiving much value out of your current mentor.

The key to crafting a successful relationship with a professional mentor is to *look* outside the box and identify individuals who can offer the best professional guidance.

Discover Your Mentors: Not Every Mentor is Obvious

A mentor is someone who watches out for you and gives you advice. Unlike a "forced" relationship between a boss and subordinates, or a contract relationship between a coach or a teacher and students, the relationship between a mentor and a mentee is often informal.

Often, they don't wear a hat titled "Mentor", and they may not be older than you or senior in professional ranking. You may not even realize someone is playing a mentor role in your life or career until much later.

There's a tendency to determine the value of advice based on who it came from. When you receive guidance from someone that you regard as your superior—someone with an impressive title—you're more likely to give their advice more weight and take it more seriously. But sometimes, the most insightful advice may come from someone among your peers, an outsider, or even someone you considered less knowledgeable than you. Sometimes the most innovative idea may come from a novice in the field. For a senior manager, you may find the best perspectives come from your subordinates or people of the lowest rank in your business.

Have you noticed mentors in your life or in your career? Do not dismiss too easily advice from someone about whom you thought, "What does he know about this?"

Keep an open mind and a humble attitude; your best mentors could be anywhere.

Asking for Help Is a Sign of Strength, Not Weakness

Now that you know how to discover your mentors, you need to

learn when to seek their help.

Your passion may be in starting your own business, or adding value to your existing professional position. With an abundance of easily accessible information online or in books, you can often get started on your own.

There is tremendous value in self-teaching, learning through practice, and learning through mistakes. Those are important skills that can carry you far and keep you growing for the long run.

But it is important to recognize when to seek out help. Some skills can only be accumulated over time, but some are a matter of knowledge and experience. There is no need to reinvent every wheel. Human progress is made on the foundation laid by previous generations. You reach further by standing at a higher ground to start with, so it is important to recognize when to ask for help. Asking for help where it matters is a sign of strength, instead of weakness.

Getting the right help at a certain point could make a difference between years of detours and missing the best opportunity, and gaining fast momentum early so you're at the right place at the right time.

How to Get the Most Out of a Mentoring Relationship

Since mentors are not "obligated" to you like in relationships bonded by monetary contracts or enforced by professional hierarchies, you have to work extremely hard and be driven and passionate so as to attract their attention and to deserve their time and effort.

The reward for the mentor is not money or promotions at work, but seeing the result—seeing they can make a difference in your progress.

To get the best out of a mentoring or coaching relationship, you first need to know how to listen to advice. Like in any communication, effective listening requires you to give up any prejudice of what you hear.

The most damaging prejudice is not about deciding if the advice is right or wrong, or whether or not to take the advice, but telling yourself, "I know this already."

When you think "I know this already," you quickly determine that this advice, though valid, is of no new value, therefore quickly brush it aside and take no action.

Often, when great advice motivates you to take the right action and it yields the right result, it is not because it is new advice; you may have heard

it many times before. Following that advice worked only when it clicked with you, when you really listened, were more capable of understanding the advice, and you thought, "Why didn't I take action earlier?"

The best advice is not the new suggestion, but the suggestion you listen to and take action on. Listen to every piece of familiar advice like it is new advice. Instead of thinking "I know," ask yourself, "Have I mastered it? Have I seen the result?" If the answer is no, make a plan and take action.

Become Your Own Mentor

Shortening your learning path is normally the reason to seek out a mentor in the first place. The most important role a mentor plays is in motivating you to reach higher goals—goals that you might have thought impossible when you first sought help from your mentor.

It is also important not to rely on professional help as a crutch forever. The goal of seeking professional help is to shorten your learning path, to become independent and competent faster.

When you are on the real battlefield, no one can do your work for you; you have to do it for yourself. You cannot go far if you have to rely solely on external motivation.

Ultimately, you have to learn to be your own motivator.

Seeking help and finding mentors is an important strategy for getting where you want to go in your career. Learning to listen to advice and keeping an open mind to recognize those around you who can serve the role of mentor will broaden the opportunities you have for learning.

While self-teaching is an important practice and can go a long way to helping you learn basic skills, coaches will know what you need, even what you do not.

Lei Wang is an internationally-recognized adventurer, motivational speaker and author of *After the Summit: New Rules for Reaching Your Peak Potential in Your Career and Life*. The first Asian woman to complete Explorers Grand Slam (climb the highest peak on each continent and ski to both poles), Lei channels her experiences to convey a message of perseverance and steadfast determination that her audiences can use at work or at home. For more information about Lei Wang, please visit www.JourneyWith-Lei.com.