

Professional C.A.T.S. Program

What is a Mentorship?

The mentor/mentee relationship is a unique and personal relationship, which transcends a mere advisor or board relationship. It is one of the most rewarding things people can be involved in outside of their family relationships. Mentorship doesn't happen by accident. Both the mentor and the mentee have their parts to play in a successful mentor/mentee relationship.

A "mentor" is a person who has had professional and life experience that can be used to help others learn and develop. The mentor is willing to share these experiences in a manner that the mentee can react to and understand. While there may be commercial aspects to a mentor's engagement, at its best the advice and help that is offered is provided freely and without expectation of immediate reward. The mentor is the "vendor" of the mentor/mentee relationship and for the mentee the value of the relationship is driven by the quality and objectivity of the mentor's advice and assistance.

A "mentee" is a person who receives the help and assistance of the mentor. The mentee is willing to be engaged and respectful of the mentor's time and accomplishments. While there may be commercial aspects to the mentor's engagement, the mentee should understand that the best mentors are not motivated by money but by personal satisfaction. The mentee is the "customer" of the mentor/mentee relationship and for the mentor the value of the relationship is driven by the ultimate value that the mentee places on the mentor's help.

It is important to spend some time thinking about what you want out of your mentoring relationship(s). Since mentoring may involve both people you know and perfect strangers, the most successful relationships happen when partners have thought through their definition of mentoring, and their own preferences and parameters for their relationships before embarking on such relationships.

Once you have defined for yourself what mentoring means (see sample worksheets), confer with your mentors and mentoring peers to see whether they share your view of mentoring. Having this initial discussion with your mentoring partners will help to avoid potential problems.

What will the mentor do for me?

The responsibilities of the mentor:

- Meet face-to-face with you at least once per year, if geographically possible
- Schedule regular phone meetings at least four times per year (monthly meetings are encouraged)
- Be available for questions via phone and email
- Discuss career goals and develop a career development plan
- Introduce you to people and organizational resources in his or her area of professional interest

What is the Mentee's role?

The responsibilities of the mentee:

- Will be available for face-to-face meetings with mentor at least once a year, if geographically possible
- Will participate in regular phone meetings at least four times per year (monthly meetings are encouraged)
- Will be present at all meetings and calls
- Will complete all projects assigned by mentor

Mentorship is not merely advice. It is a bilateral commitment between two people, based upon mutual trust and a commitment. The commitment of the mentor is to provide advice and help to the mentee with the mentee's best interests in mind. The commitment of the mentee is to be ready to listen to the advice and take the help and act upon it. The currency of the mentor/mentee relationship is personal satisfaction and shared accomplishment.

Why Aren't Directors, Advisors and Supervisors Mentors?

Mentorship sometimes occurs through formal or commercial relationships where one person supervises or assists another. However, they are distinct. In a formal relationship, such as a Board of Directors or supervision in a corporate environment, there is an advisor, who offers advice and instruction, and the advisee, who receives advice and instruction. These relationships are generally commercial in nature, and the relationship is defined by an expectation that advice or help provided is actionable. Generally, where advice and help is offered in these relationships, a failure on the part of the recipient to act in accordance with such advice and help usually conflicts with a broader commercial purpose. The best interests are generally defined as the best interests of an enterprise where the advisor and advisee are engaged. If there is a conflict between the best interests of the advisee and the enterprise, the best interests of the enterprise are controlling.

Mentorship Must be Free of Conflict

Conflict in itself is neutral – it is merely a lack of congruence between the best interests of the person giving advice, the person getting the advice, and the organization (if any) through which the advice is given. The conflict does not mean that the various parts of the relationship are destined to fail, or that the conflict cannot be resolved in a way that serves the best interests of all. In an ideal situation, any conflict should be identified and discussed. We believe that in any mentor/mentee relationship conflicts should be identified and acknowledged. This does not defeat the possibility of a successful relationship, and results in an honest relationship where parties will know which best interests will ultimately control.

The mentor/mentee relationship should usually be free of conflict. The best interests of the mentee should be tantamount. Following from this is an expectation that the mentor is not exposed to liability or financial obligation. The best mentor/mentee relationship is based upon advice and support freely given and freely ignored.

What Supports a Successful Mentor/Mentee Relationship?

The currency of a successful mentor/mentee relationship is personal satisfaction. It is not a commercial relationship, and relies upon participants deriving psychic benefits. Nevertheless, there can be possibilities of ancillary benefits – reputational benefits, introductions to subsequent commercial opportunities and networking. These possibilities motivate many mentors and mentees. However, in the moment or period when a mentor/mentee are engaging, the ancillary benefits must be of secondary concern.

Common problems that surface in mentoring relationships are:

- A. Miscommunication, lack of communication: Mentees have been hesitant to “bother” their mentors with “silly questions” when they are obviously such busy people. Conversely, Mentors who were not being asked for help did not want to interfere in their Mentees’ lives by seeming pushy and thus did not contact their Mentees without express invitation. This concern for the mentoring partner’s freedom, time and independence can lessen the impact and usefulness of the mentoring relationship. *It is important for you to be proactive in your relationship with your mentors and your peers* so that you get what you need. Your mentors cannot begin to help if they do not know what your questions and concerns are.
- B. Expectations: Mentees’ expectations for their partners can be unrealistic. One or two mentors cannot be the *only* resource on every topic. Mentors should be able to admit that they do not have expertise in a particular area, but should then look for other people who might be appropriate resources on that topic.
- C. Realities: Remember: if you have been paired with a stranger or strangers, this is a somewhat artificial way of establishing a relationship and means that, through no fault of the mentee or the mentors, some relationships may not gel as well as others. This possibility is much less likely if you begin your mentoring relationships with a frank and honest discussion about what you want and need, and have the mentors speak frankly about how they see the role of mentor.

Does That Mean Mentor/Mentee Relationships Should Always Be Informal?

The mentor/mentee relationship has to work for both parties. This often means that the best relationships are those that have clarity of expectations, for example, time commitment per month or time period. Both parties should acknowledge that most mentor/mentee relationships have an end point, where they do not work for one or the other. Expectations and motivations need to be understood and acknowledged at all times.

What Are the Most Important Attributes of a Successful Mentor/Mentee Relationship?

The most successful mentor/mentee relationships have many of these characteristics.

- **Understanding of each other's "winning strategy".** One of the interesting things about people is that under stress they tend to go back to the behavior patterns learned in childhood to get their way. In order for mentors and mentees to communicate well they must appreciate how the other deals with challenges, and speak to each other in a way that the other can hear. Mentors/mentees don't have to have the same winning strategy, but when they don't match up there is a need for a higher level of sensitivity and care.
- **Both mentor and mentee have to be coachable.** Both parties in a mentor/mentee relationship must be self-aware and able to take criticism and modify their behavior. Without coachability you don't have a real exchange of information and a shared experience – you have one-directional communication.
- **Both are respectful of time commitments.** Mentor/mentee relationships generally are not professional in nature, and occur as an adjunct to the participants' day jobs, family responsibilities and hobbies. It is not always convenient to be a mentor or mentee. Therefore it is essential that each party be flexible whenever possible, and tries to limit emergencies to real emergencies.
- **Both must act on information received.** Each party must listen to the other and demonstrate through conduct some sort of acknowledgment. A good mentor does not need to have her advice followed, but if a mentee continually ignores advice and thoughts without discussing why, he runs the risk of creating for the mentor the sense that she is wasting her time. For the mentor, not listening to the mentee and modifying advice or how it's delivered, creates for the mentee a sense that the mentor isn't really interested in a bilateral relationship.
- **There must be honesty and transparency.** Very simple to say, but hard to do. The best mentor/mentee relationships are valuable because there is a real exchange of viewpoints and feedback. This can't happen if critical facts are omitted, or words are measured to protect feelings.
- **Mentors must be willing to provide substantial benefits.** Mentees look for mentors to provide support, empathy and contacts. They should also look to their mentors to provide an external monitoring process of the mentee's progression against the shared goals identified by the mentor/mentee.
- **Mentees must not embarrass or abuse their mentor's trust.** Mentees should ensure that any introduction or other extension of assistance by the mentor is treated with respect and that there is follow through. A mentee should treat each introduction by a mentor seriously and professionally. There needs to be an appreciation that when a mentor acts to assist a mentee by making introductions or otherwise using his own influence, there is a reputational risk to the mentor if the mentee does not perform. A mentee who embarrasses a mentor will not likely get a second opportunity.

- **There must be discretion.** Along with honesty, keeping confidences is essential. A successful mentor/mentee relationship is likely to be based upon the sharing of personal information and feelings. The more comfortable the participants are in sharing sensitive information, the more valuable and lasting the mentor/mentee relationship. There is not a specific requirement for a confidentiality agreement to be in place between a mentor/mentee (unlike professional advisors). However, all communications carry the expectation of confidentiality and should be treated carefully.
- **Each party must be open to having the relationship change over time.** As is the case with any other personal relationship, the mentor/mentee relationship evolves. Many relationships are situational, or are relevant for a limited time period. Also, at times one party “outgrows” the other. “Breaking up” with a mentor/mentee can be emotionally difficult. However, since most mentor/mentee relationships occur in business, it is essential to be professional and not demeaning when the relationship is no longer satisfying to one party or the other. The business community is surprisingly small.
- **A mentor/mentee relationship is not a family relationship.** Finding a mentor is something that many look for in the business world. A mistake that many mentor/mentees make is to analogize their relationship to a family relationship, like a big sister or uncle. But, mentors/mentees are not your relatives. They are people who are in a mutually beneficial relationship, based upon positive psychic rewards. You should never take a mentor/mentee for granted. They don’t have to understand if you are having a bad day, or if you have always been nasty around the holidays.
- **Evaluate professional mentors the same as amateurs.** Even where there might be a conflict of duties (i.e., whose “best interests” are to be served), if these conflicts can be acknowledged, a mentor/mentee relationship can be created. Conflicts are not disabling, so long as the conflict can be managed to not undermine objectivity. There are some jobs where people are professional mentors, for example venture investors or executive coaches. The best mentor/mentee relationships in these circumstances mirror the best practices described above. For instance, where VC/entrepreneur relationships failure, you often find the basis of the failure in their inability to establish an effective mentor/mentee relationship.

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