

Help on the Way

Senior Leaders Can Benefit from Working with a Mentor

As leaders gain seniority, many of them view their days of being a mentee as behind them. They see mentoring as a developmental activity designed primarily to help new or emerging leaders. But mentoring can be a powerful tool for helping leaders at all levels grow and develop. Finding and working successfully with the right mentor requires commitment and following the correct steps.

Most leaders acknowledge the need to mentor others, and they carve out some of their usually scarce time to do so. However, they often don't feel that same sense of urgency when it comes to investing in mentoring for their own growth and development. Many leaders assume that mentoring is a developmental activity designed primarily to help new or emerging leaders. But mentoring can be a powerful tool for helping leaders at all levels grow and

develop in their work. Although most senior leaders realize the value of mentoring to their organizations and are willing to roll up their sleeves and dig into the work of mentoring others, they often don't think of mentoring as something that can satisfy their own learning needs.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, if any time is to be spent on mentoring, leaders usually opt to mentor others first. Second, because leaders are highly aware of time constraints, they are reluctant to ask for help from those who are senior to them and who are likely to be even busier than they are. Third, concerns about confidentiality and safety (feeling safe enough



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by Lois J. Zachary and Lory A. Fischler

to honestly self-disclose) often deter leaders from exposing their vulnerabilities. Fourth, as leaders gain seniority, many view the “mentee chapter” of their leadership development as over. Finally, there is an assumption among many leaders that if they do need additional mentoring, it will take place informally and collegially in the normal course of their work. Although these kinds of informal interactions are valuable, they cannot replace the learning that can take place in an intentional mentoring relationship.

BASIC COMMITMENTS

Mentoring is a reciprocal learning relationship in which the mentoring partners agree to work collaboratively toward achieving mutually defined goals that will develop the mentee’s skills, abilities, knowledge, and thinking. It puts a premium on mutual trust and accountability. Whether one is new to mentoring or participating in it at a senior level, some basic com-

mitments are needed to prepare for it. First, a sincere commitment to learning is essential; learning is the purpose, process, and product of mentoring. Second, a commitment to making time for mentoring is necessary to build and grow a mentoring relationship and learn what one needs to learn. Third, having a readiness to learn is important. Readiness takes many forms, usu-



ally dispositional, situational, or organizational. Let’s look at the example of an executive whose situation demanded that he consider finding a mentor.

Nick, the chief operating officer of his company, was the go-to person for everyone in the office. To some he was a father-confessor, to others a trusted friend and confidant, and to all an admired leader. He had an innate talent for listening and making people feel included and valued. Those whom he mentored, whether formally or informally, valued his wise counsel and support.

Behind the scenes, however, Nick struggled with his own leadership challenges. The CEO of the company, Charlie, was a micromanager who habitually created disruption and tension among the staff. Each day Charlie would storm into people’s offices and demand paper-

work or assign chores that weren’t part of their job areas. Everyone on the staff was uncomfortable and unsure about how to interact with the CEO. They would frequently come to Nick’s office after one of Charlie’s unscheduled “invasions.” Nick spent much of his day running interference; as a result he was neither as productive as possible nor moving the organization forward.

Although Nick felt that he was direct and clear with Charlie, very little changed. Most of the time Charlie managed to push Nick’s buttons and Nick ended up losing his cool. Nick tried to figure out why he was so effective at easing the tensions within his team but was failing in his own situation. Nick decided he could use the help of a mentor.

ARE YOU READY?

Before beginning the mentoring process in earnest, it is useful to gauge your personal readiness. You should be able to answer the following questions positively:

- Do I have a sincere interest in learning?
- Am I willing to commit time to developing and maintaining a mentoring relationship?
- Am I willing to work on my own growth and development?
- Am I willing to be open and honest with a mentoring partner?
- Am I willing to listen to critical feedback?
- Can I participate without adversely affecting my other responsibilities?
- Am I committed to being an active mentoring partner?

Once the decision has been made to find a mentor, it is time to choose the right one. The natural tendency is to zero in on chemistry when meeting with prospective mentors. If the chemistry doesn’t feel right,

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lois J. Zachary is president of Leadership Development Services, which specializes in building the leadership capacity of organizations and their leaders. She holds an Ed.D. degree from Columbia University.



Lory A. Fischler is senior associate of Leadership Development Services. She holds a B.A. degree from Lake Erie College.



the inclination is to go no further. A better approach is to identify specific criteria before choosing a mentor. Using the right criteria will help you avoid selecting a mentor who doesn't support your talent and will clarify the type of person you need. It will keep your focus on end results and minimize personal bias and low-level decision making. Beginning with the end in mind is a good start. Let's look at how Nick handled this.

Nick made a list of what he was looking for in a mentor. He definitely wanted someone from outside his organization and someone who could give him the perspective of a CEO. He also wanted someone who had a track record of good relationships with operations people. In addition, he wanted someone who would be accessible and would bring lots of energy and enthusiasm to the relationship. When Nick prioritized his needs, he decided that the most important criteria were the CEO perspective and accessibility.

Nick mentally scanned his LinkedIn connections. The people he had met at conferences, fundraisers, and trade shows were the first prospective mentors who came to mind. He considered his previous boss—like Charlie, a CEO—who also tended to micromanage but responded well when Nick pushed back. Suddenly he remembered Jon, a CEO he had met at a recent seminar. Nick instinctively felt that Jon would make a good mentor for him. He reviewed his list of criteria to validate his hunch.

When looking for a mentor, be sure to emphasize a good learning fit. Ask yourself questions such as these:

- Am I clear about why I want a mentor?
- Have I identified the specific qualities that I want in a mentor?

- Which of those qualities are nonnegotiable?
 - Which of the remaining qualities are important to me?
- The work you do in preparing to select a mentor informs your recruitment conversation with a prospective mentor, as was the case with Nick.

After taking a few moments to catch up with Jon, Nick got right to the point. "Jon, I am struggling with my CEO, Charlie. He can't seem to stop micromanaging, and I spend half my day smoothing ruffled feathers. I am at my wit's end. I have met with Charlie and tried to work through the situation, but we aren't getting anywhere. I really need some help, and if you are open to it, I'd like your guidance. I think you would be the perfect mentor for me at this time. First, you're a CEO and you have the perspective I need. Plus, from our conversations, I can see that you have a positive relationship with your operations people. I don't want to take too much of your time. Perhaps we could get together for lunch once a month and I could pick your brain and bounce some ideas off you."

After you have met with a prospective mentor, it is important to ask yourself three questions:

- Does the prospective mentor truly meet my criteria?
- Is this a good fit?
- Does this person have the time, willingness, and sincere interest to mentor me?

If you are reasonably certain that the answers to all three questions are affirmative, you can launch into the serious work of preparing your relationship.

GETTING STARTED

Once you have decided on a mentor and it is clear that the mentor has agreed to participate, the

work of getting the relationship started begins. Mentoring starts with a conversation that focuses solely on building the mentoring relationship. No matter how many mentoring relationships a person has had, each one is a new partnership, and therefore building trust in the relationship is the first order of business. This process starts with the mentee establishing points of connection and laying the preliminary groundwork for working together. Failing to take the time to



build trust ultimately undermines the success of the relationship.

Nick was looking forward to his first mentoring lunch with Jon. They spent the first twenty minutes or so catching up. Nick was glad they took the time to revitalize the easy relationship they had established the previous year.

"Well, Jon, it is great to catch up. I think we both felt a connection when we met last year, and it's nice to so easily pick up where we left off. But I do want to have enough time to deal with the issues I am struggling with and to make sure we use our time wisely. So let me propose a couple of things. First, I know I probably don't need to say this, but I hope you will keep this confidential. Charlie is well-known in the community, so I would like our conversations to stay between us." Jon nodded

in agreement and commented that it was important that the trust be mutual. “Second,” said Nick, “I hope we can commit to once a month. I know we are both busy and I know how my schedule gets—if I don’t have something like this planned, I will never get to it. I propose that we put some dates on the calendar and reschedule if we need to, but that way we both have some time carved out. I would like to ask for about six months, and then let’s evaluate. I think I am going to need

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that much time and follow-up and feedback. Six months should do it. Does that work for you?”

After your initial conversation with your mentor, consider the following questions:

- What points of connection did I discover in our conversation?
- Is there more that I need to learn about my mentor?
- Were we clear about each other’s wants, needs, and expectations for the mentoring relationship?
- Did we share our assumptions about each other and the mentoring relationship?

- Did we discuss what we each are willing and capable of contributing to the relationship?

FINDING FOCUS

Setting goals frames and defines the focus of the work to be done. Clear goals eliminate ambiguity, provide a framework for gauging progress and measuring success, ground the learning, and set a context for mentoring. Goals harness and focus energy and invite action. If goals are too broad, neither mentoring partner will be satisfied with the learning process, the learning outcome, or the mentoring relationship. Let’s return to Nick and Jon’s initial conversation.

“So what’s up?” Jon asked. Nick gave Jon an overview of the problem and went through the litany of complaints he had about Charlie. Jon pushed back and said: “Nick, you’ve got a lot of issues here. Which are the most important for you right now?”

Nick thought for a moment and said: “The first has to be how to get Charlie to stay focused on his job and stay out of my way. If that is called ‘managing up,’ then that has to be my first concern. Second, though, is my staff. I am starting to suspect that they are using Charlie’s intrusions as a way to make excuses for deadline problems and their own performance issues.”

Jon asked Nick some challenging questions about the staff’s responses, and it became clear as Nick described the interactions that he hadn’t been paying attention to accountability and had let his own standards slip. By the end of the lunch, Nick had two mentoring goals clearly defined. He also agreed to write some descriptive notes about his interactions with Charlie and bring them to the next meeting.

Goals can change as priorities change, but energy and commitment to the mentoring relationship are sparked by the mentoring partners’ work toward tackling relevant goals.

Setting goals is probably the most challenging aspect of establishing agreements for both mentors and mentees. Here are some questions for you to ask when setting your goals:

- Are my goals clearly oriented toward the future?
- Are they realistic, timely, and measurable?
- Will they require me to make a personal investment of time, energy, and effort?
- Will they contribute to my growth and development?
- Will I feel a sense of pride and satisfaction upon accomplishing the goals?

TIME AND EFFORT

Mentoring unfolds in many different ways. Some relationships just seem to flow, but others meander. What makes the difference? The simple answer is taking the time and making the effort to work on the relationship. Real progress depends on good communication, monitoring progress toward achieving the goals, and continuing to grow the relationship. None of this can happen without a respect for and openness to the feedback process.

Over the next three months, Nick and Jon made steady progress. Jon helped Nick see that he lacked clear plans and strategies. Nick became more proactive and less reactive at work, and the more he submitted plans and progress updates to Charlie, the less interference seemed to occur. Nick was really pleased with the results of the mentoring he was receiving from Jon. He was learning that much of what was harming his relationship with

Charlie was self-generated by his own lack of planning. He also met with his staff and laid out a set of expectations and rules of engagement for the team. Up-front planning and preparation produced a big payoff in performance. Nick monitored his progress by making weekly notes, which he then shared with Jon at their mentoring meetings. Seeing business results as well as his own growth and development as a leader lifted his spirits. He brought a new energy to his work as he saw real progress from his team.

It is important to regularly assess your mentoring relationship to make sure you are on track to achieve your mentoring goals. Here are some questions to consider to keep the momentum up:

- Am I meeting regularly with my mentor?
- Are we doing a good job of communicating meeting schedule changes?
- Are we able to eliminate outside influences and distractions when we meet?
- How clear is our communication with each other?
- Are we able to acknowledge and address conflicts as they occur?
- Do we talk about my progress?
- Do I receive regular feedback?
- Are we being conscientious about safeguarding confidentiality?

BUMPS IN THE ROAD

Most mentoring relationships encounter stumbling blocks at one time or another. These often arise as a result of untested assumptions, fuzzy goals, breaches of confidentiality, miscommunication, or lack of time. Nick and Jon were able to successfully work through a potential stumbling block.

Nick was looking forward to his next lunch with Jon, during which

he planned to tackle one of his biggest challenges—how to deal with Charlie’s bullying and confrontational style. Nick was disappointed when he received a voice message that Jon had to cancel. Nick e-mailed a few dates as options for rescheduling but didn’t hear back. A week later he e-mailed Jon again but still received no response. Nick was irritated and disappointed. Three weeks after their canceled meeting, Nick left a voice mail for Jon acknowledging Jon’s busy schedule and hoping they could find a time to reconvene. A curt e-mail came the next day: “Busy—will get to it.” Nick was offended and hurt. His natural response to the coldness of the e-mail was to blow Jon off and bag the whole thing. Over the next few days, his thoughts drifted back to Jon’s e-mail, his issues with Charlie, and his feelings. Nick realized that his response to Jon’s e-mail was similar to how he responded to Charlie when he perceived that he was being disrespected. (He would get hostile or snippy.) Nick knew that he needed to try a different tactic. He composed a new e-mail to Jon.

“Ouch! That hurt. I guess it means you must really be up to your eyeballs to send that e-mail. I won’t take it personally, but I am holding you to our agreement. Your wisdom is too helpful for me to give it up. Please let me know what time you do have, even if it is breakfast or a drink after work. I will take what I can get.” Nick hit “send” and felt proud of his self-control.

That afternoon, an e-mail came back from Jon. “I am sorry for the abrupt response. Things are pretty tense around here right now. Your e-mail was helpful to remind me to stop and get perspective. I enjoy our time together and need it to get away too. Let’s do an early meeting next week. You name the time.”

The process of working through the potential stumbling block gave both Nick and Jon perspective about their personal behaviors at work and recalibrated the momentum of the relationship.

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IT TAKES SKILL

Nick’s example points out just how important it is to prepare for mentoring, seek and select the right mentor, get the relationship off to a good start, establish agreements, set goals, keep the momentum up, and deal directly with potential stumbling blocks. Because Nick and Jon worked through each of these mentoring matters, their relationship stayed on track.

Knowing when and how to seek out a mentor is a leadership competency. It takes skill and commitment to be good at it. You can participate intentionally and consciously or merely go through the motions. For mentoring to be successful and effective, you need to choose the first route. ✍

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