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## CAREER DEVELOPMENT

# Let's Have Coffee: How I Found My Dream Mentor

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**M**any great leaders, from Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg to General Motors Chairman and CEO Mary Barra, have given mentorship credit for their success. Having mentors to guide one's career has been widely accepted as one of the most powerful tools for professional and personal growth. However, finding a good mentor is not always easy, especially for those who already have years of experience and have become leaders themselves.

The need for a good mentor does not become less as one gains experience. The thing that changes is what we are looking for from a mentor. When I was a wide-eyed actuarial student, I needed someone to tell me how to better manage time and study for exams; when I was a newly minted FSA, I wanted advice to how to find my specialty within the actuarial field. Many years later and two years into my current role, I was hungry for a mentor to help me improve my communication and people management skills.

These days, many employers have structured or semi-structured mentorship programs within the organization or within their actuarial teams. A junior actuarial staff member is typically paired up with an actuary in a more senior position to learn how to grow along the actuarial career path in that organization.

This kind of program is not easy to set up for a small company like mine, simply because there are not many actuaries. Furthermore, in a small company, everyone works together closely all the time, making it difficult to create that degree of separation needed between a mentor and a mentee from the same actuarial team. So when it came to finding a good mentor, I knew I had to look elsewhere, both within and outside my company.

My current product management role allows me to work with people in many other functional areas, from the project management office, to operations, to IT, and so on. While doing a system migration project, I had the opportunity to work with our newly hired head of operations, Fred Amos, and was soon impressed by his superb managerial skills. Fred had many years

of experience in business operations at a multidisciplinary insurance company, leading teams large and small, onshore and offshore. Once onboard at our company, he was making an impact immediately: solving intractable problems and re-energizing projects. I wanted to know how he did some seemingly impossible tasks so well, so I invited him to coffee and asked if he was willing to be my mentor.

Since that first coffee, I have been having the best mentee experience of my career. Fred and I first **established some ground rules to make sure the relationship works well for us both**. Since both of us have busy schedules, we agreed on meeting (calling) once a month at a dedicated time. I set up recurring meetings on our calendar for months ahead. The day before each meeting, I typically send out reminders, or adjust meeting arrangements when conflicts occur. We respect this precious time for learning and try not to veer our conversation onto work projects. If there is no particular topic to discuss, I cancel the meeting and give us back an hour of free time.

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**First, we took time getting to know each other, finding each other's comfort zone and building a trusting relationship.** Fred has had many years of experience coaching and mentoring people, and he quickly figured out what made me tick. I was very open to him from the start, sharing with him the highs and lows of my career. We overcame the initial testing phase very quickly as working on projects together had made us familiar with each other's style. I understood that as the mentee, I needed to take ownership of this relationship and make the most out of the time we interact. **I prepared agendas for each meeting, listing topics to discuss.** I often brought in real-life situations to our conversations and asked for Fred's viewpoint.

**A good mentor allows the mentee to see the true reflection of oneself.** We are often blinded by our own way of thinking and totally ignorant about what is actually happening. Talking things through with Fred allowed me to see things better. I became aware of how a different approach to a conversation can trigger a positive reaction rather than a defensive one; how a change of tone can de-escalate a tense situation; and how simple

applause can keep a winning streak going. Sometimes these new ways of thinking and talking are contrary to my intuition. **Be open-minded and keep listening**, I tell myself. We can only become better when we know better.

If there were only one takeaway from my mentorship experience this past year, it would be reaching out to those from whom you want to learn.

Like many actuaries, I find developing soft skills much harder than learning actuarial science. There is no bulletproof formula for how to motivate a team, have a difficult conversation with a staff member, or become a good public speaker. Fred gives me a box of tools but he cannot do the work for me. At the end of day, I would be the person making a proposal to the senior management, or negotiating with other teams to push the project over the finish line. Knowing the right way is great, but I need to **do the hard work** to make a difference.

Slowly, I started to use the tools from my “toolbox” in my work. And surely, I felt awkward at the beginning and I sometimes screwed up. Old habits die hard, especially when we deal with difficult work problems. But I kept at it. Then I started to see

differences, first in myself, followed by others around me. I started to build better relationships; I spent more time listening in a conversation; I got more relaxed speaking in public. Good results and positive feedback followed.

Just like in school, I review my work with Fred once in a while to gauge my progress. I report to him how I used the toolbox, successfully or not; I tell him how much better I feel when a new tactic worked; and I let him know any positive feedback I receive because of our mentorship work. Mentors love to see their mentees succeed. **They enjoy hearing about how they are making a positive impact to the workplace and to the mentee’s career growth.** A periodical report card review also allows me to focus on new areas to improve. A year has passed since that first coffee with Fred, and our mentorship is still going strong.

If there were only one takeaway from my mentorship experience this past year, it would be **reaching out to those from whom you want to learn.** They can be actuaries or non-actuaries; they can be your leaders or peers or even someone you are mentoring. Some people may appear to be very busy, but you will be surprised by how willing people are to offer help. A cup of coffee led me to a year-long learning experience and a lifetime friendship. So can it for you. ■



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