



Article from

The Stepping Stone

October 2018

Issue 70

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Maximizing Your Development Through Mentoring

By Brian Pauley

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the May 2015 issue of The Stepping Stone.

"Mentors are all around us; they are everywhere we look. Anywhere there is a sharing of knowledge or a teaching of experience, there is a mentor. Anywhere there is an individual with life lessons to impart on an audience—more often than not, just an audience—there is a mentor."

—John Wooden

A Game Plan for Life—The Power of Mentoring

You might expect this article would be about mentoring others, and that would be a worthy piece. However, there is a relevant topic of equal importance: *being mentored*.

I once heard someone in a significant leadership position state that they never had a mentor. I find that hard to believe, but if that is true, that is forfeiting one of the most fruitful development opportunities. Why?

Those who maximize their development utilize mentors.

Opening yourself up to and making the most of mentoring represents a big opportunity for your growth and development. In this article, I discuss five ways to maximize mentoring.

1. HAVE CLARITY ABOUT WHAT YOU NEED AND WHAT YOU WANT TO IMPROVE

This is listed as item #1 on purpose. In order to get anything out of mentoring, other than by accident, you should possess knowledge of what you want out of the relationship. This is important because a quality mentor helps you navigate along your intended path. A mentor may naturally steer you along their own path or what they feel is best for you, and not knowing where you want to go leaves you susceptible to being steered in a direction that is wrong or bad for you, perhaps even confusing you.



What if you don't know what you want to improve? If this is the case, then figuring this out is your top mentoring priority—and you must select a mentor capable of helping you with that. More on this below.

To maximize your growth and development, it helps to know where you are and where you want to go.

2. CHOOSE MENTORS WISELY

How do you go about choosing mentors? Randomly picking someone at the office above you on the organizational chart would only work out by accident. Armed with the information from #1 above, talk to people and do research to discover who might be able to help you. Having the knowledge and experience to help you grow is required of a mentor. Otherwise, you'll just be having conversation. Conversations are fine, but accelerating your growth and development is the point of being mentored.

Another (and very important) requirement of mentors is they must have time for you. It does you no good to have a mentor who cannot make time for you. For mentors at your office, this can be an issue if you go too high on the organizational chart. An entry-level employee may learn a lot from the company CEO. But, the CEO will probably have little time to invest, and would focus mentoring energy on those in the executive ranks.

Do not be afraid to end mentor relationships that have run their course or that are not working. Sometimes mentorships evolve into friendships. If you share a passion together, a mentorship may last a very long time. Otherwise, if approached properly, you will grow to a point where you will likely seek other mentors. This is OK. Your mentor will likely pick up new mentees as well.

Mentors with the right knowledge, experience and availability maximize your growth and development.

3. PREPARE THOROUGHLY FOR MENTORING CONVERSATIONS

It is OK to exchange pleasantries and catch up with your mentor, but I'm assuming your mentor will have a small window with which to work. So, you must be ready to get down to business, which means:

- Being prepared to extract as much value as you can from the discussion.
- Demonstrating that you value your mentor's time.

Consider these items to assist with preparing for your mentoring conversations:

- **Set aside a window of time dedicated to conversation prep.** You will need to discover your ratio, and it will vary from mentor to mentor. Consider setting aside at least two times the length of your conversation to prepare. For example, if you have a one-hour meeting with a mentor, spend at least two hours preparing.
- **Review the notes and actions from your previous discussions.** Remind yourself what you and your mentor previously discussed. Demonstrate that the conversation was worth the time invested by your mentor because of the actions you took. I talk more about this in the next section.
- **Come up with a list of questions for your mentor.** Questions are the backbone of your mentoring time. Have more questions than you have time for. Running out of things to discuss 30 minutes into a 60-minute meeting gives the impression that you are not taking the investment seriously. Questions that you did not get to can be rolled over to the next discussion or perhaps you can email them to your mentor afterwards.

Thoroughly preparing for mentoring conversations maximizes your growth and development.

4. TAKE ACTION AND FOLLOW UP ON WHAT YOU ARE LEARNING

Doing this serves two purposes:

1. It demonstrates that you take what you are learning seriously, thus showing your mentor the time is being utilized wisely.

2. You make actionable progress toward your mentoring goals.

I suggest opening mentoring conversations by reviewing what you learned and what actions you took with that information. For example, if your mentor suggested networking with Jim, the VP of marketing, you might tell her, "*The last time we talked, you suggested that I meet Jim in marketing. I wanted you to know that we met over coffee last week and had a great conversation. Thanks for helping me make the connection.*" By doing this, your mentor takes your conversations seriously. And, you both get the gratitude of you having taken action. Imagine a few months, a year, or more of actions taken and communicated to your mentor.

Holding yourself accountable through action and follow-up maximizes your growth and development. It also communicates to your mentor that you take the interaction seriously.

5. MENTORING GOES BEYOND FORMAL ONE-ON-ONE RELATIONSHIPS

"The important thing is that you open yourself up to being a student."

—John Wooden

In-person mentoring relationships are great and essential to maximizing your growth. But, just as significant are the mentors you don't know: authors of books, public figures, those who have passed away leaving a legacy of lessons, etc.

With the Internet and social media today, you can even connect with a mentor and establish a relationship with that person. I have connected with several prominent authors via social media and have benefited greatly from them. Never underestimate the opportunities that exist by being willing to reach out to people from afar. When it comes to those whose expertise is growth and development, they love to help people grow.

Expanding your mentors beyond people you know maximizes your growth and development.

Being mentored is a very powerful weapon in your development arsenal. Like any such tactic, it should be taken seriously and approached with intention. My hope is that you will use the five items above to take full advantage of being mentored. If you don't have one today, I encourage you to find one or more. If you already have one or more, I hope this piece helps you take your encounters, whether they be face-to-face or in the things you read, to the next level. ■



Brian Pauley, FSA, MAAA, is vice president, actuarial services, at Highmark Health in Pittsburgh, and also executive director, certified leadership speaker, trainer and coach with The John Maxwell Team. He can be reached at brian.pauley@highmark.com.