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The Mentor: What Do YOU Need from a Mentor?

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The Mentor: What Do YOU Need from a Mentor?

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Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection, and professional growth.

Just what does a mentor do anyway? What does it mean to mentor someone? What does it mean to have a mentor? These are questions I've struggled with over the years.

Most basic definitions say that a mentor is an experienced and trusted advisor, a guide, a tutor or coach. Some stress that a mentor is an older or more experienced person who gives advice over a period of time. Yet these explanations could also describe a supervisory relationship, instruction, or on-the-job-training. So how does mentoring differ?

One explanation that I have found helpful is available via the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists (2017). It defines mentoring as:

"...a relationship between two individuals based on a mutual desire for development towards career goals and objectives. The relationship is a non-reporting one and replaces none of the organizational structures in place. It is additional to other forms of assistance, such as developmental assignments, classroom instruction, on-the-job training, and coaching."

Based on this definition, a mentor is not your supervisor, and plays a unique role outside traditional organizational structures. The document further clarifies the difference between a coach and a mentor in terms of relationships, the nature of the expertise shared, the direction of the advice, and the feedback given. In particular, the relationship is mutually beneficial, and the expertise shared by a mentor is wide ranging and often includes sharing a network of contacts. The goals are set by the mentee and the focus is on long term development rather than task oriented (AAPS, 2017).

A key aspect of this in my mind is that the goals are set *by the mentee*. If you are seeking a mentor, you need to think about *what it is you would like to get out of a relationship*. Are you looking:

- To expand your network of contacts?
- For tips and tricks to facilitate change or manage difficult personnel situations?
- To develop in areas where training isn't accessible on the job?
- To gain perspectives on different cultures?
- For someone to challenge your thinking?
- For insight into organizational politics?
- For advice on balancing work and life goals?

Thinking about why you feel you need a mentor is an excellent place to start when hunting for one.

In looking back on my career, I was never quite certain if I had a mentor. For various reasons, no one person seemed to fit my image of a mentor, until I read *Expect to Win*, by Carla A. Harris (2009). Ms. Harris defines *three roles* that are distinctly different and we each need them all to succeed in our careers.

An **Advisor** is someone who can give you “advice pertaining to an isolated question that you may have about some issue or challenge...” This is a person who “has the skills or experience to give you good, strong advice.” They may or may not be in your industry, but could help you with a particular task or navigating the politics of a situation. **If you need an Advisor**, Ms. Harris recommends that you look for someone “you admire”, who you believe has the “skills, experience and a network that can be useful to you and from which you can learn” (Harris, 2009, pp. 102-103).

A **Sponsor** is a person “passionately focused on your strengths,” who advocates for you behind closed doors when you are not in the room. This is someone “...who has political and social capital within an organization” and “is willing to use that capital on your behalf” to help you progress in your career. **If you need a Sponsor**, Ms. Harris recommends that you ask yourself: “who has the authority to hire and fire? Who seems to have the last word in team meetings? ...Among the people I have met, who will be personally committed to making sure that I succeed?” She also recommends that you “make sure that the benefit to your sponsor for getting you what you want is well worth it in their eyes” (Harris, 2009, pp. 116-118).

The **Mentor** is the person you trust to keep your confidences with which you develop a personal relationship. You tell them “the good, the bad and the ugly” and they respond with honest feedback about your behavior and strategies that is in context with your strengths, weaknesses, background, and career aspirations. They must know all of the unvarnished details of a situation. You “...rely upon them to give you good, tailored developmental career advice” and to not interject their own personal bias into their advice. **If you need a Mentor**, Ms. Harris recommends that you look for someone with which you already have a relationship, who you trust implicitly (Harris, 2009, pp. 104-109).

As I learned about the Advisor, Sponsor and Mentor, I easily identify individuals who have played each of those roles in my career. Surprisingly, my most helpful mentor was an employee assistance counselor. He knew a lot about my organization and the individuals within and came to know me very well over the years. Ms. Harris’ perspective also taught me why one of my Sponsor relationships went wrong. I made a strategic error and unknowingly changed the relationship so that it was no longer to the person’s benefit to serve as my Sponsor.

Think about the individuals who have helped you in your career or throughout your life. Which roles did they play? Do you have individuals how who have become sponsors, advisors or mentors to you? If not, which are you most in need of and who might you approach to serve in that role?

Future columns will address more information on the mentor/mentee process, how to choose a mentor, and how to approach a potential mentor, sponsor or advisor. In the meantime, I encourage you to read the two sources I refer to in this piece.

Happy hunting!

Sources:

American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists (AAPS). (2017). What is Mentoring? Retrieved from https://www.aaps.org/uploadedFiles/Content/Career_Center/Professional_Development/What_is_Mentoring.pdf

Harris, Carla A. (2009). The Mentor, the Sponsor and the Advisor: Having them All. In *Expect to Win: 10 proven strategies for thriving in the workplace* (pp. 101-127). New York: Penguin Group.