

CHOOSING A MENTOR

A little preparation goes a long way when establishing a mentoring partnership.

Do you want a mentor? Do you need a mentor? If you answered "yes" to these questions and if you have seriously thought about seeking a mentor, chances are you will benefit from the mentoring experience. But before you begin your search for the ideal mentor, there are a number of issues you need to consider. Following is advice to help you prepare for a successful mentoring relationship.

Understanding your mentoring needs

Before approaching a potential mentor, you need to identify what you hope to gain from a mentoring relationship and what type of a mentor is best for helping you meet your objectives.

- Start by identifying your short-term career goals.
- Where do you see yourself in the next year or two?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities do you need to get there?
- What key experiences could a mentor provide that would benefit you most?

Answers to these questions will help you identify the type of mentor that is right for you. For example, depending on your goals, you may want to seek a high-ranking executive whose career path you would like to learn from. Or you may want a mentor closer to your level of experience, but who you feel could help you in very specific areas of growth and knowledge.

Choosing a mentor who is right for you

Besides being able to meet your developmental needs, the best mentors are people who are excited about learning, and who are continuing their own development. Also, good mentors will achieve a sense of personal satisfaction from seeing others succeed and have a desire to be active participants in others' learning and growth. You'll want to seek out someone who possesses such traits and who also sets high standards for his or her work and can set an example for you. If no potential mentors readily come to mind, ask your colleagues or managers if they know of anyone they think would make a good mentor for you. Your organization may have a mentoring program that can pair you with a mentor based on your goals and the mentor's knowledge and skills. You can also find potential mentors outside your organization by attending meetings and events hosted by your professional association.

Approaching your potential mentor

Much of the onus for initiating a mentoring relationship is, and should be, on the protégé. You need to have the self-confidence to approach a potential mentor and effectively present the merits of a mentoring relationship. Once you have found an appropriate individual, approach your potential mentor with a well-developed plan for your partnership. Having done your homework will be very beneficial at this point; share your short-term goals, your accomplishments, and your major developmental needs and objectives. Your potential mentor needs to know if he or she will be able to help you acquire the skills or competencies you want to develop. Be completely honest in your explanation of why you want a mentor and why you are asking this particular individual. Realize that your potential mentor may feel that he or she is not an appropriate choice for you, or the individual may not have the time to commit right now. Many individuals who are asked to be mentors are

honored at the request, and although they may not have considered mentoring someone before, often agree to give it a try. If the person agrees to begin a mentoring relationship, you'll want to have a focused conversation about what you both want to accomplish.

Preparing for the first meeting

One of your biggest responsibilities as a protégé is to make sure you are getting what you need from your mentor. Remember, in a mentoring relationship, you must be the driver. Your first meeting is the perfect time to get your relationship moving in the right direction.

To prepare for this meeting, consider the following questions:

- What should your mentor know about you in order to work most successfully with you?
- How do you learn best-by reading, observing, doing, or listening?
- What are your desired outcomes for the mentoring relationship?
- What do you expect from your mentor?
- How will you know if the relationship is working?

Likewise, ask your mentor to come prepared with answers to questions such as:

- What do you expect from me as your protégé?
- What do you think will be able to help me most?
- How do you like to work with people you are teaching and developing?
- What do you want to gain from this partnership?

The answers to these questions will help you establish goals and objectives for the mentoring relationship. Finding the right mentor can greatly enhance your personal and professional development. Taking the time to think about your career goals, developmental needs, and the type of mentor you want early on will help you get the most out of your relationship.

Ambrose, L. May/June 2002. Choosing a Mentor. *Healthcare Executive*. Retrieved from <http://www.ache.org/newclub/CAREER/MentorArticles/Choosing.cfm>.