



Why you need a mentor in all economic climates and how to find the right one

Managing your career is about planning ahead. It sets you apart from others who are merely waiting for events to happen to them. It is more productive than drifting or delaying action until the 'job happiness fairy' comes along. She may never arrive!

How to build bridges across organisational lines and form career-help friendship networks are two of the areas a career-wise person needs to know about in order to survive, as well as to advance their employability. To succeed because of what you have done and can do, rather than as a token of length of service or seniority requires the counsel of others who have already pioneered the route through the quicksands of organisational life. Gail Sheehy, author of *New Passages*, names such people 'Polestars and Survivor Guides'. The need to gather information through consultation with others has never been so urgent as when you are intent on being more in charge of your worklife direction.

Organisation culture

Employment environments are social systems in the same way that families, professional associations and clubs are. Each has a particular culture, an expectation of certain forms of behaviour, a continual change in individuals' loyalty to one another or their lack of it. You need to ascertain, pin down and define the unwritten rules before you can implement effective career strategies which benefit, rather than stultify, your quest.

Every employment environment has a distinct culture. The career-wise person acknowledges this and seeks out another person with longer employment service to help understand it. An organisation's culture dictates what is appropriate behaviour and what is not. This influences the way each employee acts towards another; what is praised and what condemned.

The culture of a chartered accountancy practice, for example, may contrast considerably to that of a credit card company or an advertising agency or an IT software consultancy. Even each Department within the Public Sector has culture-dictated idiosyncrasies regarding the unwritten norms of personal conduct and permissible self-advancement strategies.

Need for role models

As you develop your career within the organisational hierarchy, you are likely to need to find pathfinders in higher positions. If ambitious and intent on upward mobility, you need a sounding-board or role model you can go to for advice and to discuss your career enhancement strategies.

You cannot progress in your career simply by reading HR Procedure Manuals, induction booklets, organisation charts or by socialising at the Friday evening get-together. No longer is it a general pattern that promotions are 'fixed' at the pub after work. The world of work has become more subtle and also confusing.



Value of a mentor

While busy solving a series of problems or carrying out the responsibilities of a challenging position, it is difficult to observe ourselves and evaluate our career situation objectively. What might appear to us correct behaviour for our career progress may not be compatible with the views or expectations of management. Our efforts in one direction, when viewed in the totality of our overall career goals, may be just treading water rather than contributing to our personal advancement and inner well-being.

Advice can come in different forms. Mentors can also be sponsors, role models, networkers or coaches. Now is easy to get confused by this so here is an arbitrary division of what you may expect from each. It may help you seek out a mentor with the potential to help you in the ways you most need.

Mentor

A mentor restores sagging spirits and helps you to learn from setbacks, improve fluctuating morale and provide support by listening and sharing their experiences.

- Inspires and offers encouragement
- Listens to and understands personal problems
- Shares critical knowledge
- Offers wise counsel
- Asks critical questions
- Challenges and confronts
- Triggers self-awareness
- Reviews and clarifies
- Suggests resources
- A teacher of business or technical expertise

Sponsor

Likes to help you to advance your career when they see evidence of talent. They say positive things to decision makers that you cannot say about yourself.

- Opens doors
- Helps you advance
- Introduces
- Has influences
- Tells you what to do
- Advises on opportunities

Role Model

Demonstrates a way of behaving which links to your values and operating philosophies; or is successful doing a job role you want to do.



- Models key behaviours to achieve significant tasks
- Provides a standard
- Influences goal setting and future development plans
- Provides a sounding board

Networker

Assists you to establish contacts, develop relationships and obtain useful information from people.

- Builds a referral base
- Identifies opportunities
- Provides support
- Provides advice
- Shares information
- Provides friendship

Coach

Supports and facilitates you to maximise your short- and long-term work performance and career aspirations.

- Facilitates the process of career action step planning
- Delegates tasks
- Supports long-term development needs
- Provides feedback
- Provides development opportunities and training
- Views employees as partners in preparing development plans
- Advises on standards
- Identifies required behaviours and results

Why the need?

When working hard to advance a career, we often need someone to talk to about our feelings and behaviour. In many cases, we would feel inhibited talking to our boss because of a reluctance to share too much of ourselves with a person who has the power to advance or suppress our career ambitions.

We all need help from another person to bring out our best performance. A person with whom we can share our hopes and disappointments in an unfettered way, who can review the proposed next step in our personal career management program. A mentor can prevent impulse from overruling logic by acting as a coach.

A good coach is regarded as essential to improving the performance of an athlete. The value of coaches is that they are not directly involved in the activity. Coaches can observe our performance and identify the critical areas requiring refinement. The next step is to

provide feedback in a manner that brings about a change in behaviour and improvement in the result.

The coach/mentor you select should be a person you can trust—someone with whom you can be open and who is willing to be frank with you. Remember, you are not necessarily looking for a friend. You are seeking another person as a counsellor who will help you manage your own career rather than you leaving it to chance.

A mentor is someone we feel drawn to from whom we can learn. When we are faced with a decision concerning our careers and behaviour at work, we are commencing a new transition. A transition requires us to audit what we want, identify the options, select one and move purposely to implement the steps to bring the transition to a successful conclusion. We may need to change mentors when the nature of career transition differs. A person able to advise us on one issue may not be suitable for a different transition.

A good mentor will help you to see not only the options and tasks before you but also the broader context that gives those tasks meaning. Having a mentor is not a passive process of just listening to advice. You need to question, debate, submit proposals and prepare for discussions with your mentor. Unless you do, your mentor cannot help with three distinct types of assistance. These are to support you, to challenge you and to provide vision.

Mentors support, challenge and provide vision

While supporting us, mentors show that they have empathy with our problem and personal situation. They listen, inspire trust over what we are sharing and help us define the boundaries within which decisions are to be made. Their role as challengers to our ideas is to introduce contradictory views, question the basis of our opinions and perspective of the problem. They may sometimes decline to answer our questions directly in the best interests of helping us.

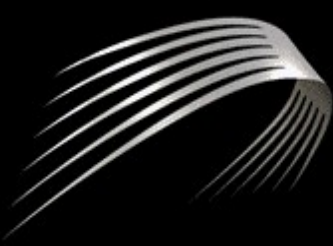
As we progress through to the stage of vision being provided, the mentor reassures us that the career transition can be made, helps us define what will signify success and provides an insight as to the potential rewards for the resolution of our particular dilemma.

A good mentor is not there to provide the answers but to assist us develop our skills at resolving career-related complications. To demand ‘Which way should I go?’ is improper use of a mentor relationship.

As you develop a relationship with your mentor, use the following checklist to guide your expectations of their behaviour. A good mentor provides:

Support by:

- Listening;
- Providing structure;
- Expressing positive expectations—assisting self-confidence;
- Serving as an advocate—sometimes talking with others on our behalf;



- Sharing information about themselves;
- Making it special—the relationship is one both value highly.

Challenge by:

- Setting tasks—so that we gain insight from carrying them out;
- Engaging in discussion—talking so that different ways of viewing a problem emerge;
- Providing opposite perspectives—so that we consider each perspective, evaluate many aspects before we decide on an option;
- Setting high standards—helping construct positive self-fulfilling prophecies, aims and expectations which are high, but achievable even though with difficulty.

Vision by:

- Modelling—providing a description of what we are trying to become;
- Describing a map—helping to form a comprehensive picture of our present lives and articulate and plan for accomplishment of reasonable and attainable life goals;
- Providing a mirror—extending our self-awareness so that we see ourselves in new ways.

The credentials of your adviser

What credentials should you seek in your sponsor, coach and mentor or role model? They are likely to be:

- Most likely to be older;
- People capable of providing some guiding principles and endorsing your overall goal;
- Capable of engendering your trust;
- Able to be constructively critical;
- Able to maintain the confidentiality of confidential information;
- Predisposed to talk about you more than about themselves.

To commit your personal thoughts to another in anticipation of constructive advice, you must be confident in their skill, knowledge and ethics. You must be sure that they have the credentials to help you before you start communicating. The relationship must be reciprocal to be sustained. You must, by your subsequent actions, reflect your sponsor's own qualities, contribute to their need for self-esteem and communicate pleasure in the sharing of wisdom. Your adviser must facilitate the development of your own decisions, not dictate your actions. In turn, you need to prepare draft proposals to assist in this style of relationship.

Rewards!

A shortage of role models, sponsors, coaches and mentors is not a good reason to hold back on taking action after you have evaluated the risks thoroughly. The sheer excitement of feeling you are the driver of your worklife direction, not just the passenger, should be your

aim when you embark on resolving to initiate career advancement actions.

The results that you can expect from identifying persons who can be your role model, mentor, coach or sponsor are:

- Real learning and behavioural/attitude change take place within you.
- It is an effective check on the selection of your next career enrichment strategy.
- Self-protection and, thus, protection for those you care about who may be affected.

By itself, this is sufficient argument to follow the procedures these recommendations.

Misunderstandings

Whether the relationship with your helper is short or lasts a long time, it should never be one of dependency. It is a relationship for mutual planning and mutual negotiation. As you both focus on one or more worklife problems you have raised, your helper advises you and makes recommendations. You should not, however, abdicate your responsibility for making your own resolutions and deciding to act in your own particular way. It's your worklife. It's you who must implement the decisions. Your helper is there to suggest, check your reasoning and provide encouragement.

Having similar personalities and backgrounds is not essential for the success of a career support relationship. But if you share similar values, attitudes and sometimes spiritual views, the relationship is likely to be more effective. Your aim should be not to please, but to learn from them; not to avoid questions, but to ask them; not to hide mistakes, but to discuss what can be learned from them; not to conceal information, but to share it; not to be protected, but to be encouraged to take new risks.

To avoid misunderstandings, make your expectations explicit. Let your needs be known. Let your helper know how the relationship is meeting your needs. Share what you are feeling and why.