How to be a Good Mentor

Make the Most of Your Commitment
*Mentoring can be a challenge that is well worth your time and effort. Use these tips to get the most out of mentoring sessions – both for you and your mentee.*

Tips for Mentors

1. **Be fully present.** Mentoring requires excellent listening and your full attention. Set aside your daily challenges and pressures during a mentor session so that you can devote your full attention to your mentee. Whether the mentoring session is in person, by telephone, or via email, this means making yourself unavailable to others during the mentoring conversation. By not allowing interruptions, the quality of your mentoring will be significantly more effective and productive for both of you.

2. **Take time to make a personal connection at the start of the session.** One of the pleasures of a mentoring relationship is the sense of connection between two people. Before launching into the focus area for the day, spend a few minutes making a personal connection. “Small talk” often helps both people to relax and get ready for a deeper conversation.

3. **Ask open-ended questions.** In order to provide relevant perspective, the mentor must understand the mentee’s situation and concerns at a deep level. Rather than asking questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no,” practice asking questions that call for a reflective response. Remember to ask early on why the mentee has sought a mentor and what she would like to gain from the experience. It is better to know some of the right questions than to have all of the answers. High gain questions are open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions that typically start with “Who, What, When, How, Tell me more about...Give me an example of...”

4. **Listen with curiosity, not judgment.** Be conscious of your own listening and strive for deep listening coming from your own curiosity rather than problem solving. You will find that your mentee faces issues that you have also faced. However, each person is unique and comes to their present moment from a different path. Listen with the goal to learn more about the person. Do catch yourself judging the mentee and self-correct by reminding yourself to simply “follow curiosity” to learn more.

5. **Try not to interrupt, unless there is a need to manage time or focus the dialogue.** Do paraphrase or “feed back” what the mentee says to confirm that your understanding is accurate.

6. **Ask direct questions to focus the session.** Mentoring sessions often go all too quickly. To focus the session, ask simple and straightforward questions at the beginning of the session to ensure that the conversation is focused on the topics that are “top of mind” for the mentee today. For example, you could ask, “What would you like to talk about today?” or “I’d love a quick update and then let’s choose a topic for today’s session.” Ask early on in the session: What help do you need from me?

7. **Notice what has “heart and meaning” for the mentee.** A good mentor conversation involves much more than trading information and knowledge. By paying attention to the emotion and energy of the mentee, you
will be able to observe what matters most to the mentee, as well as where he or she may feel discouraged or overwhelmed. Notice your mentee’s enthusiasms and areas of confidence and point them out to the mentee to help build confidence and connection.

8. **Tell your story.** People often learn best through storytelling. If you have experiences related to the challenges faced by your mentee, check with the mentee to see if she or he would like you to share the story of your experience. Make sure to focus on the aspects of your experience that are most pertinent. Telling your story should take no more than 10 minutes of a mentoring session, though it may lead to a rich discussion that links directly to the mentee’s situation. Try not to preach!

9. **Share the conversation rather than doing all the talking.** Sometimes, mentors mistakenly believe that their job is mainly to impart wisdom and expertise. If you find yourself talking at length, with little interruption or dialogue with your mentee, stop yourself and reorganize the conversation by asking questions about the mentee. Watch out for the tendency to “download” when someone asks the question you’ve been waiting all your life to answer!

10. **Set and honor boundaries.** Mentoring relationships work best when each person knows what to expect—and what not to expect. During the first session, establish the way in which the mentoring relationship will be set up. How frequently will you meet? Decide on the best form of communication (email, phone, Instant Messenger, etc.). How long will the conversations last? May the mentee contact you by email or telephone in between mentoring sessions? Be clear about how you would like it to work. Attention here early on prevents misunderstandings later on.

11. **Follow through on your commitments.** Inevitably, you will find yourself volunteering the title of a book, a referral to one of your contacts, to review or pass on a resume or some other small service to your mentee. Make note of your promise and make it a priority to follow through. Dropping the ball can lead to confusion and mistrust in the relationship. Do make commitments carefully, being realistic about what you can offer and by when you can deliver it. You may want to ask your mentee to prompt your follow-up with an email to you after the session.

12. **Be encouraging and action-oriented.** Recognize that the problem isn’t figuring out what to do—the problem is doing it!

13. **Give helpful feedback.** Provide constructive feedback that is specific, descriptive and nonjudgmental.

14. **Honor confidentiality.** Conversations between mentor and mentee must be considered private. It is a violation of trust to talk about the mentee’s life and issues outside of the mentoring conversation without the permission of the mentee. Be careful about honoring the mentee’s trust. Hold mentoring conversations in places where details shared in confidence will not be overheard by other stakeholders or interested parties.

**For Mentors: Language to Avoid**

Have you ever felt judged by someone whom you thought was listening with the intention to help you? When mentoring others, you can avoid giving this impression by avoiding the language of judgment. Here are some examples of what NOT to say:

- “You should....”
- “Yes, but....”
- “Either/or”
- “There’s only one way to do it....”
- “What you need to do is....”
• “What I always do is....”
• “Your problem is....”
• “Actually what needs to be done is....”
• “If you don’t..... you aren’t going to....”
• “I wouldn’t think about it that way.”

For Mentors: Language that Encourages
• “You could...”
• “Have you considered....?”
• “What would happen if you...?”
• “What might be the consequences of not acting on this?”
• “Yes/and” rather than “Either/or”
• “There are many approaches that might work...”
• “One idea is...what do you think?”
• “What do you think needs to be done?”
• “How else could you think about this?”
• “What resources are available to you right now to support progress?”
• “When has this happened to you before? What did you do?”

Four Basic Beliefs of Good Mentors
• The mentee is naturally creative, resourceful, and able. Nothing is wrong or broken – no need to “fix” the mentee. Mentees are capable of finding and acting on the answers.
• Mentoring focuses on professional life but may also include personal concerns that affect the mentee’s life and work.
• The agenda comes from the mentee not from the mentor.
• The relationship is a designed alliance, not a top-down directed conversation.

Listening: The Hallmark of a Great Mentor
Good mentors are empathetic listeners. They understand the benefit for the mentee of speaking aloud what is on her mind. The seasoned mentor does not focus on interpreting the mentee’s story for problem solving. Instead, the mentor seeks to help the mentee define the real issues. H/she listens for the word choices, intentions, emotions, and nuances of the story. The mentor uses active listening and encouragement to connect with the mentee, while focusing on asking powerful, open-ended questions.

Mentors listen for:
• Goals and intentions
• The meaning behind the story
• Themes and recurrent words
• Resistance, fear, anxiety, hesitation, “BS”
• Progress
• Tone, mood
• Commitment and passion

For mentoring information and resources, visit www.infocomm.org/mentor
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