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THE MENTORING PROCESS:   
Essential for New Fast-Tracking Leaders

By Donn LeVie Jr./Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC

What do Mark Zuckerberg, Charles Schwab, Bill Gates, and Oprah Winfrey have in common? Besides being mentors themselves, they each had a mentor who served as a trusted counselor to them. Zuckerberg was fortunate to have Steve Jobs as his mentor; Bill Gates has Warren Buffet; Charles Schwab had Andrew Carnegie; and Oprah had the poet Maya Angelou as her mentor. Many other famous people cite family members, professional acquaintances, and friends who provided valuable guidance, encouragement, and wisdom that propelled their success.

## Having a Mentor Can Be a Fast Track to a Successful Career

When I began working as a cooperative education student at the NOAA oceanographic lab prior to graduation, my first mentor was the lab director who volunteered for the role. During my first week, he gave me a handful of journal articles to read that were written by researchers who worked at the lab. When I finished that assignment a week later, he asked me, “Based on what you’ve read, how do you now see your position contributing to the success of the work being done here?”

The assignment forced me to do a deeper dive on what was expected of me working in the lab and as a member of the scientific party during NOAA research expeditions in the world’s oceans. That assignment gave me a much greater appreciation for the outcome of the research as well firing up my eagerness to succeed. In fact, the NOAA lab promised me a full-time position six months before I graduated in 1978.

Shortly after being hired, two leading scientists at the lab took me under their wing, sharing the details of their research projects and including me as a member in their respective scientific research expeditions in the Atlantic and Indian oceans as the Gulf of Mexico. Those experiences not only further boosted my interest with the work I was doing but opened doors for me a few years later when I moved to the oil and gas exploration field.

In 1982, while working at Phillips Petroleum, that NOAA lab director provided a necessary recommendation for me when I became one of 5,000 original applicants for NASA’s Space Shuttle Program as a mission specialist.

## Mentoring Then and Now

Mentoring relationships today have evolved to align with a dynamic workplace environment. The definition of mentoring has changed from having more rigid boundaries, guidelines, and expectations of both parties, to one where mentoring is now tailored to the specific individual and/or organization needs. Such arrangements are typically shorter in duration (from a few hours up to twelve months) compared to lengthy, more formal and longer associations prior to the digital age. Mentoring relationships today are also more task- and specialty-oriented to address current and near-future needs. Mentoring relationships in the past focused on helping with a mentee’s overall career objectives, which required the longer-term relationship.

In many instances, mentoring relationships today are less formal, such as “just-in-time” mentoring associations that may last only hours for some specific outcome and may more resemble coaching than actual mentoring. In fact, the trend today is to merge coaching and mentoring, often incorporating a Socratic questioning methodology by mentors rather than the old-school “leading by the hand” method. The Socratic method builds critical thinking skills to reflect on, evaluate, and judge assumptions underlying a mentee’s thoughts and actions. (See “Six Types of Socratic Questions” at [tinyurl.com/y75uqjo8](https://www.tinyurl.com/y75uqjo8)).

## Who Can Serve as a Mentor?

Anyone with expertise, skills, knowledge, and experience to share with others and a willingness to serve as a trusted advisor to others can be a mentor. Manager-employee and employee-to-employee (peer to peer) are common mentor-mentee arrangements. Higher level mentoring-type arrangements between C-suite executives and other high-level professionals often are elevated to a more involved “advocate-protégé” relationship.

## Mentor-Mentee Communication: Keys for Successful Matchups

Mentoring works best for both parties through phone and in-person conversations as often there’s more to the message in vocal intonations and facial expressions and gestures that email just can’t convey. It’s best to use email only for transferring data or information. Respect each other’s workloads and schedules because it’s a two-party commitment to each other.

Other important considerations for successful mentor-mentee matchups include:

* Reserving the necessary blocks of time for meetings and commit to them
* Defining clear objectives and realistic, attainable goals where feedback is needed
* Mentoring means providing sound advice based on expertise and experience, not personal opinion.

# **“**Reverse Mentoring” Opportunities on the Rise

One area of mentoring that has seen significant interest lately is that of “reverse mentoring.” This approach involves younger employees who are more familiar with digital technology and social media applications mentoring more senior executive who are deficient in those areas. Reverse mentoring arrangements often meet less frequently, generally once a month for up to one year. The mutual benefit is obvious: Mentors gain access to senior executives while mentees become more proficient with digital technology and social media for promoting the company’s brand.

## Be Prepared for Entering a Mentor-Mentee Relationship

As requests come in for mentoring, one question that every mentor asks is: How do I decide who to mentor? This is a critically important question for potential mentors because of the time and effort commitment required. Other considerations include:

* How motivated is the mentee to move his or her career forward?
* How large is the gap from where they are now to where they want to be? (Generally, the wider the gap, the less effort required by the mentor.)
* Am I the best person available to help this individual with his/her request?
* What is it the mentee wants to learn? What specifically about my experience or expertise does he or she believe can help them? (Asked directly of mentee to determine whether the relationship will be a good fit with the mentor experience/expertise.)

It’s a good idea to first ensure that potential mentees are sufficiently motivated and have a clear understanding of what they want from the mentoring arrangement before agreeing to engage in the mentor-mentee relationship.

## What If Your Mentor Isn’t Available?

Remember that mentoring is a relationship, and relationships develop organically and naturally over time. Workloads and home schedule conflicts are the bane of twenty-first century living. The timing of your mentoring request is just as important as selecting the right mentor for your development. If the mentor you have in mind isn’t available, check in with the him or her from time to time; offer to help in some way. Have coffee or lunch together occasionally to get out of the office for an hour. Nurture that connection and you’ll likely find it evolve into a mentoring relationship.

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