

Mentor Match - What makes a good Mentee

Communicate and listen

You should ultimately oversee your own career path. Your Mentor will help you achieve whatever it is you want to achieve. Don't allow them to inject too much of their own desires or opinions into your plan. Share your aspirations as well as your expectations of your Mentor. For example, are you looking for support, guidance or insight?

Make sure to target your approach. For instance, maybe you want help from someone who's experienced a similar situation or perhaps has access to interesting opportunities.

If you and the Mentor share your hopes and desires for the relationship, you'll be able to establish a mutually valuable dynamic. Mentoring is not a one-sided conversation; it is an open discussion that encourages thoughts, questions and concerns.

If you feel too insecure to ask a question, help your Mentor find a way to earn your trust and build your confidence. Communication is 99% of a quality Mentor-Mentee relationship. If the two of you can't clearly share ideas, thoughts, opinions and feedback, then it defeats the purpose of the relationship. A Mentee needs to be able to confide in the Mentor. Without this trust, the relationship will not succeed.

Accept constructive criticism

While Mentors don't want to judge or offend their Mentees, they shouldn't filter feedback to avoid hurting them or breaking their confidence. Shared experiences is a great way to receive a message. For example, ask them about a mistake they made and how they learned from it. The point is to educate, not tear down the person.

You are unlikely to get everything right on the first attempt, so you need to be able to receive feedback constructively but effectively to ensure that you improve and progress. Instead of focusing on your mistakes or shortcomings, reflect on the progress and achievements you've made thus far, and then seek guidance to improve your work.

If you feel sensitive or defensive, encourage the Mentor to draw from their own experiences to share a time that they had a slip-up.

Practise empathy

It's important to relate to your Mentor and understand their mindset and feelings. If they're having a bad day, you should pick up on their energy and work to help them through it.

Empathy is a vital character trait. You should be able to understand how others are feeling and how to best approach them. You might think empathy cannot be taught but, with practice, you can achieve higher levels. This requires effort: listening more, being curious about others, appreciating those who are different from you, illuminating any innate judgments, and educating yourself to break false stigmas and ignorant notions.

For instance, don't expect everyone to progress at the same rate. Mentors will have different strengths, interests, backgrounds and experiences, so be careful not to copy them. A common mistake Mentors in very technical fields make is assuming a rising-star Mentee in the same field will perform, think and act the same way as the Mentor did. What might have been a key challenge for the Mentor may no longer be necessary or applicable.

Patience is also an essential virtue – you may not grasp everything as quickly as your Mentor did or find their working method to be the most effective method for you.

If the mentoring isn't helping, work with your Mentor to change it. Adapt as you go.

Make decisions

Some Mentors may be tempted to take the wheel while you ride shotgun. This is not how your relationship should operate. The job of the Mentor is to help their Mentee learn the role, not to do it for them.

One of the most important skills you need to develop, with the Mentor's guidance, is the ability to think on the spot with competing demands and high pressure. Some call it creativity; others call it common sense. Whatever you call it, you have to be able to solve problems on the fly. The role of a Mentor is to help you develop those skills.

Think of yourself with a driving instructor: They are sitting in the passenger's seat, allowing you full control. However, they're still there to offer advice and directions or to pull the emergency brake.

Expect an element of autonomy once you have established a good relationship and trust level with your Mentor. Assume some responsibility, and make your own decisions in certain aspects of the job. This will encourage you to think for yourself and improve your confidence.

If your Mentor allows you to take control, you will have much more faith in both them and yourself.

Observe the behaviours of your Mentor

You can learn a lot simply by observing and learning from the words and actions of your Mentor. You will pick up on how they behave and interact with others, or approach a certain task at hand. If they're stuck on a project, you can watch how they react to any obstacles that come their way. If they're negatively influenced by a task, and it shows in their behavior, they may end up pushing you away or making you believe that their behaviour is acceptable.

To set you on the right path, your Mentor should be talking you through multiple ways to handle difficult situations. There is always a choice on how to react to bad news or a failed project. This could be talking to your supervisor when you have made a mistake or learning how to regroup when you've failed a task. Learning to manage your reactions will hinder or help you through any difficult time.

Being a good role model is equally true when dealing with a positive situation. It's important to apply wisdom and forward thinking, so explore what actions you can take to make that a reality.

Remember to show humility in positive situations, meaning that you don't let success make you forget about the overall picture. Be alert to Mentors who push for success over learning experiences. If you see this happening, don't allow yourself to go down a path filled with half-earned successes. Ask your Mentee what they would do differently. Sharing a learning experience is the sign of both a good Mentor and positive role model.

Expect to make your own mistakes, but seek to learn valuable lessons from observing and learning from the experiences of your Mentor.