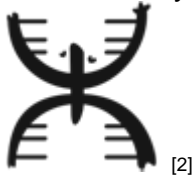


# Mentoring Decoded <sup>[1]</sup>

Submitted by [Marvi Ann Matos](#) <sup>[2]</sup> on 11 June 2016 - 8:38pm



*By Dianne Chong, PhD, Jill Seebergh, PhD, Genevieve Lim and Marvi A Matos, PhD*

## Definition of Mentoring

The simplest definition of a mentor is someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person. The term, “mentor”, was the name of Odysseus’ counselor and has come to mean a wise and trusted counselor or teacher. Today’s definition is much more expansive since mentoring is a relationship between two individuals that allows one or both of the individuals to gain perspectives that enable them to develop and grow in various aspects of their career and life experiences. Oftentimes, the protégé is seeking career and life guidance and advice. The mentor shares her own experiences and helps the protégé to reflect on career directions and provides advice with respect to job fit and impact.

## What is Not Mentoring?

While mentors can offer valuable advice, they should not be expected to just provide absolute answers. It is the job of the mentor to use a more Socratic method to stimulate critical thought in the protégé. At times, protégés feel that they should be on a particular path in their careers. The mentor can help to determine whether this is the correct course and can offer advice, but cannot and should not direct the protégé to change course. Some protégés believe that it is a mentor's job to get the protégé her next job. This is not true. While mentors can be advocates, they should not be expected to find the protégé jobs.

### *The Importance of having a Mentor*

It is important to have a mentor for a variety of reasons. Mentors provide advice and information that can help the protégé develop and navigate through different stages of her career path. At different points in each protégé's career, different types of mentors may be needed. Early in the protégé's career, knowledge about the organization and what different career paths exist are important. As the protégé's career continues to develop, mentors can provide guidance on the choice of career paths. The mentor's experiences can provide more insight with respect to the pros and cons of different career paths. As the protégé grows, she encounters different situations that require different skills; a mentor can provide advice about dealing with these situations. During the entire career, the mentor can also advise the protégé on skills that need to be developed. During the course of the career, the protégé and mentor can seek or recommend additional mentors that have different experiences and perspectives.

### *Tips to Find a Mentor*

A will to learn can lead to mentors. Enrolling in technical or leadership courses and attending conferences are necessary to continue to improve. Good guidance within the field can come from the course's instructor or the conference speakers. The advantage of selecting a past instructor or speaker as a mentor is that you can analyze if your style is compatible with the person as the person is teaching the class or presenting their work.

Another venue is via your personal or professional network. With social media at the tip of our fingers, searching our networks is easier than ever. Watch out, we say here searching is easy, building that network, takes some dedication. Open your social media accounts, analyze your network and ask yourself if there are potential mentors within your already built web or if someone from your web can introduce you to potential mentor.

The third idea is as simple as talk to your teacher, professor or manager. Those who are leading at school or at work have brilliant collaborators and colleagues willing to be mentors.

### *Preparing for a Mentoring Meeting*

Preparing for a mentoring meeting is instrumental to optimize time and to show respect for the person's time. Some people might prefer more spontaneous conversations. Still, when that moment of pure wisdom comes and you are receiving the gift of great advice you need to be prepared, here are some tips:

### *Introduce yourself and ask the mentor about her/his background*

Even if you have read their bio ten times, it is important to get to know each other. The story told can potentially have nuggets of wisdom for resilience, perseverance, adaptation to challenges, etc. There is intrinsic wisdom in the life-work stories that can lead to a higher level guidance.

### *Pick a topic of discussion that is current in your mind.*

Maybe you are applying to an academic program and you need advice to develop your long term goals or on the value of the program. Maybe you have been struggling to adapt to a new working environment. Whatever the topic is, it should be genuine, as in something in which you can use some help. A topic will help you drive a conversation. At the same time, be flexible to switch topic if your mentor has another idea of a fun conversation!

### *Work on your highlights and share them*

Highlights are useful to drive a conversation and to guide you in your next steps. Highlights can be related to the topic in hand. Let's say you are struggling with class-work balance, bringing highlights on the topic can lead to critical discussions that can propel you forward. This takes us to the next tip.

### *Have questions prepared*

It is an honor for a mentor to be asked questions. Questions do not need to be ultra-deep existential, just focus on what will be most helpful to you. To be fully prepared sends a simple message, "as your protégé I highly value your time and I am ready to learn".

### *Demonstrate continuity*

Keeping clear notes from session to session is important for you and for your mentor. The sequence of meetings can be a continuous conversation from which both mentor and mentee are growing. A sense of continuity can also demonstrate your development and how important it is to you to receive feedback.

### *What Should You Expect of a Mentoring Relationship?*

In simple words, a successful mentoring relationship is one in which there is value added. Ask yourself, how do you feel at the end of your meeting? Energized? Inspired? Ready to conquer the world? Challenged? Thoughtful? Full of ideas? These are all great potential outcomes. The point is that both parties share ideas and learn from each other.

Your mentor might be in a position of authority or power and they can potentially become your sponsors in the future, however, your mentor is not your promotion ticket. Your path will be defined by you, the opportunities that come across, timing, matching, etc. Your mentor can help you with recommendations, but you will be earning your promotion.

Another misconception is to consider your mentor's path or their advice as a recipe. Mentoring is

not a cooking recipe. The tools that the person used at their time, might or might not be the ones you will need in your circumstance and time. Life is complex and our experiences are very different from each other. Instead, focus on the values that have enabled the person to be reach their goals.

### *A Mentor's Expectations of Protégés*

Mentors expect protégés to prepare for their discussions. The first meeting should be one where both protégé and mentor can introduce themselves. The introductory meeting should be used to set goals and objectives and establish a meeting schedule. Topics for subsequent meetings can be determined by current job activities, career roadmaps, or organizational changes. Protégés should feel free to propose specific incidents for advice, or the sessions can deal with longer term planning of a career path. There can also be deviations from the schedule depending on circumstances.

### *Personal Experience of a Protégé by Genevieve Lim*

My college years were all about continuous adjustment – the recognition of gaining this long-awaited freedom underlined by a new level of responsibility. Failures, whether driven by academics, social relationships, or personal health, fed my mind with a myriad of nervous questions and doubts. Essentially, the big question was “am I doing all of this right?” Fortunately, meaningful guidance and advocacy gained from various mentors throughout school helped me alleviate these simmering doubts.

As I progressed through college, I realized that opportunities for help was available and willingly given, but it was my responsibility to pursue them. I developed mentoring relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and at distinct points in their lives and careers, each one offering me a unique perspective and mental model. Mentoring relationships urged me to consider various paths to achieve my personal goals, as each of my mentors differed in his/her approach to success. My mentors exposed me to an array of career options, concrete opportunities to pursue, academic topics to explore, a network of people to contact, and unique experiences to make my own. I also recognized that a high sense of accountability accompanied such a mentoring relationship. I knew that my mentor dedicated this portion of his/her time to me. In return, I ensured to come prepared with insightful questions about personal development topics which I desired to understand better. I garnered these ideas from leadership courses, scenarios from work and school, or even simple observations from daily activities.

I have been a professional engineer for almost two years now, and I still have those nervous questions in my head as I choose to solve complex problems, experience conflict in the workplace or encounter a fork in my career roadmap. However, under the guidance of my mentors, *I feel included, less afraid, and more prepared to take on what my career path has to offer.*

### *Personal Experience of a Mentor by Jill Seebergh,*

I have worked as a chemical engineer for twenty-one years since earning my PhD and have served as a mentor during my entire career, including graduate school. Sitting down with a

colleague or student to discuss the pathways of education, career and life is a seemingly simple act, but one with potentially profound consequences for both the mentor and the protégé.

In the early years of my career, I felt a strong sense of obligation to “pay forward” the gifts of mentoring that I had received, yet I was not at all confident that I had any worthwhile advice to offer a protégé. After all, as a freshly-minted PhD with limited job experience, I was still learning my engineering profession and relying heavily on my own mentoring network. Well, surprise! Twenty-one years later, I am still learning something new every day and relying on my mentoring network – and I truly hope that never changes. With the wisdom of hindsight, I now understand that there is no magic gateway or set of criteria whereby one transitions from *having* a mentor to *being* a mentor. Instead, it’s a mash-up – a dynamic environment of both giving and receiving advice, being a mentor and having a mentor (or several). And the guidelines for success in a mentoring relationship apply equally to both participants – be prepared for the conversation, listen carefully, focus on actionable plans, and understand that there are many fruitful pathways to career satisfaction.

### *Mentoring is One Key to Inclusion*

Wherever you are in your career, being a mentor and a protégé is not only important for your development, it is a part of finding drive, inspiration and guidance. At times, your career will resemble more a jungle, than a linear path. To be a protégé and mentor throughout this jungle will help you feel included in something bigger than you. Inclusion, while intangible, leads to motivation and higher creativity and productivity. So, what are you waiting for? Go for it! Find a mentor and be a mentor!

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