

career hacks

Mentoring relationships
don't only help and
benefit the mentees.



Reaping Rewards as a Mentor

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By Chris Browning

The benefits of mentoring are well documented, often highlighting such gains as increased employee engagement and retention, greater productivity, and career growth. And while research points to the value mentees and mentors both get from mentoring, most organizations focus on making sure the mentees are growing and developing.

Yet, mentoring doesn't only benefit mentees' careers. Mentors also can see career gains from mentoring—if they're doing it well. Mentoring can help mentors:

- gain leadership skills
- practice relational skills
- improve listening and communication skills
- become more self-aware.

In mentoring, the mentee's goals are what give the relationship its purpose; however, the mentor's willingness to share their knowledge and time with the mentee is what drives the relationship forward. Without the mentor's readiness to share wisdom, experience, and insights with the mentee, the relationship will likely wither and die without ever being fruitful.

To make mentoring a beneficial activity for your career, try these relationship hacks.

Examine your previous failures and not-so-great moments

Life is not Instagram perfect. We all mess up and make mistakes. The best thing to do with mistakes and failures is to learn from them.

Use your own not-so-perfect experiences as a learning tool with your mentee. People can gain just as much valuable insight by hearing about what went wrong as they can from



hearing about what went right. If you are honest with your mentee and open about your missteps, you will find that your vulnerability will not only help your mentee learn from your mistakes but will also likely spark new ideas for what she can try instead. You may be surprised by how valuable these types of mentoring conversations become for you and your mentee. You may just learn something new.

Ask for your mentee's feedback on your listening and communication skills

As we rise through the ranks and take on more responsibilities as leaders in our companies, it can be easy to forget that we aren't always the smartest or most important person in the room. It also can be hard to stop talking, yet this is exactly what you need to do as a mentor.

One of the easiest traps to fall into as a mentor is talking too much. You may think that it is your duty to share every nugget of information about a topic that you can, but this misses the ultimate point of mentoring: helping the mentee develop. Sharing a story or explaining a theory can be helpful, but remember that conversations should involve both of you talking and listening, not just you lecturing. Improving these communication skills can help you in other areas of your professional and personal lives. Don't be afraid to ask your mentee for feedback on how he thinks the relationship is progressing, what you are doing well, and what you could do differently that could help the relationship.

Practice personalized leadership

A good leader makes every person feel like she matters. Your mentoring relationship provides a great opportunity to practice this skill on a microlevel. One way to do this is through radical candor, a concept popularized by author



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Kim Scott in *Radical Candor*. She describes it as when you care personally and challenge directly. “Radical Candor really just means saying what you think while also giving a damn about the person you’re saying it to,” she writes.

Real and honest feedback can be one of the best ways to encourage your mentee—even if the feedback may be hard for the mentee to hear. You can give your mentee a sense of where she may be falling short in achieving her goals, but you also should practice coupling that with conversations and ideas on how she can address these shortcomings. That balanced approach can help you build critical skills necessary to becoming an excellent leader.

Be open to learning

The mentoring relationship is focused on the mentee’s learning goals and development areas, but that doesn’t mean you can’t learn too. Use the mentoring relationship as a time to explore emerging trends and topics, bone up on new management theories, learn about topics outside your areas of expertise, and drink from the fountain of knowledge wherever you may find it. Some of the most profound learning can occur at the least expected times.

If you are open to learning, you will find countless lessons you can learn throughout your mentoring relationship. You can also consider reverse mentoring, where you are the





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mentee and your mentor is someone more junior but who is more knowledgeable than you in a given topic, skill, or competency around which you want or need to know more. (This would be a completely different relationship from the one in which you are the mentor). This could be a whole new way to look at learning and development.

Never stop building your professional network

Just because you are a mentor doesn't mean you have all the answers. One of the greatest values you can bring to the relationship is guiding the mentee in the right direction.

That may mean recommending a Ted Talk on a pertinent topic or suggesting that your mentee speak to a particular colleague who is an expert in a relevant field. As you help the mentee gain insights and find resources, you will continue building your own network and repository of information that can aid in your own work and development. Mentoring is about building relationships, and one of the best things you can get out of your role as a mentor is a growing network of connections.

At the end of the day, when you focus on your mentee's growth and development, you give yourself opportunities to grow and evolve. Your dialogue style, listening skills, creativity, empathy, and much more can be affected. Mentors often say they get as much from the mentoring relationship as their mentee does, and this is a big reason why. We should never stop learning.

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■ Five Traits All Mentors Should Possess

Which of these traits do you have?

Can spot potential in others: Effective mentors have a positive view of others that greatly increases how much learning can occur. They push mentees to achieve their goals and stretch themselves, in large part because the mentors believe the mentees have the potential to succeed.

Are networked and resourceful guides: Effective mentors enjoy a positive reputation and are held in high regard by colleagues at various levels in the organization and in different functions. They can help broker new interpersonal connections for their mentees and act as a resource who provides insights into where to go for information.

Display patience and tolerance: Effective mentors allow mentees to make mistakes and then use the mistakes as positive opportunities to learn. They know that they were once in a similar position and have empathy for the mentees as they take risks and seek to grow in their desired skill or field.

Give encouragement: Effective mentors possess the ability to build up mentees' self-esteem and encourage them. This is a quintessential trait and helps them embody the role of coach and advocate for their mentees. Mentors should not give false or inflated praise but should be encouraging.

See the big picture: Effective mentors have a larger perspective of the organization or their area of expertise. This helps them generate useful suggestions and bring up points that their mentees would otherwise not consider.