

# How to Select, Nourish, and Conclude a Mentoring Relationship

Kendra L. Justice

A mentor helps you master the unspoken rules of corporate America. If you are energetic and demonstrate initiative, a mentor welcomes the opportunity to assist your growth. To accomplish your mentoring goals, define what you want to achieve and then select a mentor. A successful mentoring relationship requires nourishing to maintain—you must value your mentor's time and demonstrate appreciation. When you no longer require your mentor's guidance, you can end the mentoring phase of the relationship with honesty and appreciation.

## WHAT A MENTOR PROVIDES

A mentor helps you navigate effectively through the corporate structure, acquire appropriate business behavior, and develop self-confidence. A mentor can help open professional doors, convey important political and professional information, and help you gain respect with colleagues.

A mentor gives vision—shares dreams and encourages you to reach your potential. With a mentor's guidance, you define goals, map a plan of action, and take action.

A mentor teaches by guiding you to think for yourself. As a teacher, your mentor acts as a role model and helps mold your professional behavior. As a student, you learn to perform your tasks more effectively and to accept responsibility for your actions.

A mentor provides emotional nurturing by listening and counseling in times of professional crisis. During those times when fear grips and overwhelms you with feelings of inadequacy, a mentor guides, encourages, and supports you while you meet the challenge. When you are too emotionally involved to think clearly, a mentor can provide a reality check — what is real and what is not.

## THE FOUR PHASES OF MENTORING

In the early eighties, Kathy Kram (1), PhD, professor of organization behavior at Boston University's School of Management studied mentoring relationships and found that the mentoring role evolves through four phases:

- During the initiation phase, both people have fantasies about the relationship. The junior person begins to feel support and respect from the senior person.
- During the cultivation phase, the emotional bond deepens, and the rewards are greatest for both individuals. This is the period when the junior person grows and develops the most under the mentor's counseling and guidance.
- During the separation phase, the junior person no longer needs the guidance and is ready for independence. This period can be uncomfortable and requires understanding from both parties.
- During the redefinition phase, the relationship evolves into peer friendship. The mentor relationship is no longer needed. Stress from the break-up diminishes and gratitude and appreciation increase.

## FINDING A MENTOR

Before you seek a mentor, define your personal values and clarify what a mentoring relationship means to you.

Since the most beneficial partnerships develop when both parties trust each other, it is very important to select a person with integrity—someone you trust. You must be willing to trust your mentor with all your feelings—joy, anger, fear, and love—when you succeed and when you fail.

Look for someone who exhibits the mentoring skills you value and is confident, self-assured, understands the corporate ropes, and values networking.

While shared professional goals is the safest and most productive foundation to build a mentoring relationship, a word of caution: select someone outside your chain of command. If your mentor has direct authority over you, you might not risk trusting your mentor's ability to respond objectively if a conflict occurs. You need to feel free to discuss any contradictory circumstances without feeling challenged or threatened. Another possible area of conflict might arise if you choose a mentor of the opposite sex. Both Kathy Kram and Nancy Collins (2) in independent studies reported that sexual issues are apt to arise if your mentor is of the opposite sex. It is easier to share professional experiences and remain focused on career goals with someone who experiences life as you do.

Rather than asking someone to be your mentor, cultivate the relationship and let it develop slowly and naturally. Mentoring is a commitment of time and energy, and you should demonstrate to a prospective mentor why you are worth the investment. The possibility exists that you and a potential mentor might select each other as you gravitate together—perhaps at work, at a dinner meeting during a professional get together, or at a leisure time event or activity.

#### DEVELOPING A POTENTIAL MENTOR

Once you select a promising candidate, show appreciation for any assistance and interest that the potential mentor gives. Encourage the relationship, and honestly share who you are and what ambitions you dream of achieving. Do not let too much time lapse before you touch base again—continue showing interest in the relationship.

Does the possibility exist that someone is listening to you, suggesting alternative ways of handling situations, giving you emotional support or acting as a role model? If so, someone may be trying to mentor you, and you are not attentive to the clues.

When Kathy Kram conducted her research, the mentoring relationships that she studied lasted from three to ten years. Previously, a young professional joined a company with the intention of building a career path within the organization.

Now professionals no longer join a company with a lifetime commitment; they tend to change companies and even careers multiple times in their lifetime. Mentoring relationships have evolved along a similar path, and while the long-term commitments still exist, you might enlist several mentors for shorter durations.

Nancy Collins mentions that you might consider having more than one mentor or having several relationships that provide some of the mentoring functions. A dual mentorship offers an opportunity to learn from more than one person, and it is not as demanding for the mentors. If a mentor becomes too busy or moves away, the withdrawal feelings would not be as acute, and your own needs would not suffer.

As an alternative to the traditional one-on-one mentoring relationship, you might consider forming a mentoring group comprised of peers and experienced professionals. By coming together for a specific time period on a regular basis, professional issues are shared and feedback is given in an informal manner. This approach is less demanding on mentors and encourages networking.

#### MEETING A MENTOR'S GUIDELINES

As you cultivate a potential mentor, the person determines if the relationship will be mutually beneficial to both parties. A mentor's guidelines on what to look for in a mentee may vary, but all mentors share these rules: you must be teachable, accept criticism, and have integrity.

A mentor presumes you are teachable—receptive to new ideas. Your views will be challenged and you must be willing to try new approaches to old ideas and learn new skills.

A mentor presumes you can accept constructive criticism. Criticism is a tool that a mentor uses to sharpen and refine your skills. Criticism encourages growth; it does not mean that you are wrong—it means that there is a difference of opinion. When your mentor offers criticism, accept it gracefully, act on it if necessary, and move on.

A mentor presumes you have integrity—you must act in good faith. If you make a conscious decision to accept your mentor's suggestion, then you own the decision, and you must accept responsibility for your actions.

## NOURISHING A MENTOR

To develop the relationship to the maximum, you must be willing to share your experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, listen to your mentor's suggestions, and decide on a course of action.

At times, fear of telling what you really think or what you really did outweighs the risk of what your mentor might say or do. If you take the risk and share honestly, you may discover that it is 'no big deal.' Your mentor has probably heard it all before and can help you search your motives and attitudes in a caring way. By trusting and being honest with your mentor, your relationship grows to a deeper level of respect.

When your mentor offers a suggestion, listen carefully to what is said, and when appropriate, take action. Keep your mentor informed—did you take your mentor's advice, and if so, what were the results and what did you learn? Give your mentor your opinion—it could be a fresh perspective. Perhaps your way of solving a problem provides clarity or vision to your mentor's career.

As your mentor passes on experience and wisdom, it is important to keep focused on your own style. Do not imitate a mentor's style—develop your own style and be yourself.

If the nuances of your personal life go beyond the scope of the mentoring relationship, it is important for your mentor to know that your personal life is affecting your work. Tell your mentor if your personal and business lives are colliding. By understanding the complete scope of your emotional stress, your mentor can be more supportive and offer constructive suggestions.

Tell your mentor often that you appreciate the time and guidance given. Value the relationship and show your gratitude by

- maintaining contact,
- sharing your feelings honestly,
- respecting your mentor's time,
- being truthful, and
- supporting your mentor to colleagues.

## ENDING A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

A wise mentor understands that mentoring relationships are cyclical—by design, they come to a close. From the beginning, the goal is for you to function on your own, and once the relationship goes beyond its potential, you need to let go. An experienced mentor knows when to back off and carefully lets you continue on your career path.

When a relationship sours or your mentor needs to move on for professional or personal reasons, a premature ending can cause emotional trauma. It is normal to feel a loss and experience a grieving period. If this should happen, capitalize on networking, develop new contacts, and allow yourself time to heal.

When the time comes for you to let go, be honest with yourself and your mentor. If both parties recognize that the relationship is coming to a close, the relationship comes to fruition without anguish. If not, you may need to be the one to back off slowly and gently: call less often, solve problems on your own, and network with others.

The bond that you and your mentor develop during the formal mentoring period can develop into a lasting friendship. You can continue to keep in touch, share contacts, and become part of each other's networks.

## CONCLUSION

To get the most benefits from a mentor, you must select a mentor who exhibits the professional skills that you desire. A mentor expects you to be teachable, accept criticism, and have integrity. You must be willing to trust your mentor, share who you are, talk about your mistakes, listen, take action, and accept responsibility for your actions. If you value the relationship, it can develop into a lasting friendship when the mentoring phase is complete.

## REFERENCES

(1) Kran, Kathy E., "Mentoring at Work, Developmental Relationships in Organized Life." Scotts, Foresman and Company, 1985

(2) Collins, Nancy, "Professional Women and Their Mentors." Prentice Hall, Inc., 1983

## OTHER REFERENCES

Weisinger, Hendrie, "How Tough Critics May Be Mentors In Disguise." Working Woman, June 89

Justice, Kendrea, "Mentoring in a Non-Structured Environment Pass It On." Workshop presented at the 38th International Technical Communication Conference, New York, NY, 1991

Kaplan, Linda, "Corporate Mentoring." Proceedings of the 38th International Technical Communication Conference, New York, NY, pp. ET-185, 1991

Stoner (A.F.), Russel B., "Mentoring: A Professional Responsibility." Proceedings of the 36th International Technical Communication Conference, Chicago, IL, pp. ET52, 1989

Kendrea L. Justice  
Technical Writing Analyst  
7575 Keister Road  
Middletown, Ohio 45042  
513-855-6235

Kendrea Justice mentors reentrant women and persons entering the professional world. She is a member of STC, has presented at the last two ITCCs and has been a technical communicator in the telecom/data communications industry for six years.