

YOUR CAREER



Will You Mentor Me?

You want to take your relationship to another level. Here's how to pop the question.

By Kathleen Barton

Janet admires Linda, the president of their local ASTD chapter. Linda is a training manager for a large corporation, a position that Janet hopes to hold one day. Janet wants to ask Linda to be her mentor, but is reluctant to do so. Linda seems so busy, and Janet doesn't want to impose. What if Linda says no? After all, she doesn't know Janet very well. Janet isn't sure how to ask; she's afraid of looking foolish.

A mentor can help you gain knowledge and skills, understand company

culture and politics, obtain new opportunities and contacts, and, ultimately, achieve greater career success. But how do you find one, and how do you pop the question? First, identify someone whom you think will make a good mentor. Then, follow these steps to form the relationship.

1. Research the person's background. First, do your homework. Approach this as you would an important job interview. Find out everything you can about

your potential mentor, including her work responsibilities, interests, and needs. Talk to others who know her. The more you know about your potential mentor, the easier it will be to approach her and establish a relationship that will work for both of you.

2. Make contact. One of the best ways to break the ice is to have a mutual friend or acquaintance introduce you; you're more likely to be well received. Another effective strategy is to get involved with your potential mentor in business settings. For example, attend a meeting of a professional association that he belongs to. Introduce yourself there, and chat about a topic of interest to him. If you have the time, volunteer to work on a task force or committee with your potential mentor. That'll enable him to see your skills in action.

3. Request help. Once you've made contact, you're ready to request advice from your potential mentor. Start by offering positive feedback: Compliment or congratulate her in some way. Use this opportunity to let her know what you admire about her and hope to learn from her. You might say, "You're good at leading projects. It has helped me to be a part of this team and watch you. Would it be OK if I came to you for advice on my project?"

Keep your request simple, and try to make it as specific as possible. Because *mentor* can be a loaded word with varying definitions, avoid using the term unless you define what you mean. Rather than ask, "Will you be my mentor?" make a specific request—for advice on your business or career, or for feedback on your performance.

Consider what you can offer in exchange. Mentoring is a two-way street. If you can do something for your potential mentor, then by all means, tell her. You might offer to take her out to lunch in exchange for picking her brain on a particular topic. One creative mentee

What to Look for in a Potential Mentor

First and foremost, your mentor should have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to fit your development needs. Ask yourself or others,

- Who is successful in my field?
- Whom do I admire and respect?
- Who are the most influential people I know?
- Who thinks I have potential?
- Who has encouraged me?
- Who has helped me in the past and might help again?

Make a list of potential mentors, and, for each person, identify what it is you admire about him or her and what he or she has achieved that you would like to achieve yourself.

offered to sell products at the back of the room for a speaker and author. In return, the mentor offered advice on how to get started in the seminar business.

4. Meet. Once your specific request has been accepted, you're ready to meet with your potential mentor. Never go into this meeting cold. Set goals, identify your desired outcomes, and prepare a list of questions.

During the meeting, stay focused on your potential mentor. Get him to talk about himself. As a good icebreaker you might ask about his career history. For example, "You've done so much that I hope to accomplish someday. How did you do it? How did you get started?" Listen attentively.

Then, ask your prepared questions, and request specific suggestions. Take notes. Be sure to keep the initial meeting brief, about a half-hour or so, and never more than an hour. Be respectful of your potential mentor's time.

5. Follow up. After the meeting, try some of your potential mentor's suggestions and share the results. Follow up by calling to thank her, or send a note. Let her know how much you appreciate the time she took to meet with you and how valuable her advice is. Identify something in particular that she said that was significant to you, and tell her how you tried her suggestion and what the result was. Once she understands how you've benefited and how she can also benefit from your interactions, she'll be more open to giving further advice.

6. Ask to meet on an ongoing basis. Now you're ready to broach the subject of a mentoring relationship. After your potential mentor has had a chance to not only meet and interact with you, but also to see the value of what he can provide, you're in a good position to request an ongoing relationship. Let your potential mentor know how helpful he has been, and indicate that you could learn a lot from him in the future. List your career goals or the skills you want to develop. Suggest that you meet with him regularly, or ask permission to get help on an ad-hoc basis.

Again, keep your request simple and specific. For example, "I've gotten so much out of our time together. Would you be open to meeting once a month over lunch? I'd love to get your advice on important goals and decisions." Or, "You've been so helpful on this project. May I come to you for advice on my future projects?" You may also want to mention what you can provide in return.

Assure your potential mentor that you'll be respectful of his time and job priorities. Answer any questions or concerns that he might have, but don't pressure him into an immediate decision.

Following that six-step process will help you succeed in gaining a mentor's support and achieve your career goals, whether they include becoming a training manager or owning your own training business. Now, let's return to the opening

Mentor Checklist

It's difficult to find one mentor who has every quality you need. Therefore, you'll need to determine which qualities are most important to you. Go down this list, checking off the characteristics of your potential mentor. If yes was your response for each item, then you're fortunate: You have identified a good mentor. If your response was *not sure* for a few of the characteristics, you don't have to rule out that potential mentor. You can still have an effective relationship as long as your response was yes for the characteristics most important to you.

Yes	Not Sure	No	My potential mentor
			has achieved a level of responsibility or recognition that I want to achieve
			possesses the knowledge, skills, and expertise I need
			is influential in my organization or field
			is someone I respect, admire, and trust
			is willing to invest the time to mentor people
			listens in order to understand others' points of view
			encourages people to achieve their goals
			has excellent coaching skills.

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scenario to see how Janet handled the potential opportunity with Linda.

Janet volunteered for a board position as the chapter's volunteer coordinator. In her role, she got to know Linda, the president. After a meeting, Janet asked Linda for advice on recruiting volunteers. She tried Linda's suggestions, and then told Linda of her success. Janet asked Linda if she would be willing to meet once a month. Janet indicated that she was interested in developing her leadership and management skills and hoped to become a training manager one day.

Linda agreed, and the two women met off and on for about two years. Janet took on the role of president-elect of the ASTD

chapter and then became president. In the two years, Linda provided many opportunities for Janet, one of which was to recommend her for a training manager position. Janet interviewed for it and landed the job!

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