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Why Mentoring Matters, and How to Get Started

Professional mentorships used to be the workplace norm, but today they're hard to find, even though they matter more than ever. Here's how to find one, and how to get the most from it.

By Lizz Schumer

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My first desk had an inert hand grenade in one corner and a notebook in another.

As a public relations assistant to Kathy Hochul, the Erie County clerk at the time, my job was to make the office (and by extension, Ms. Hochul) look good. The grenade reminded me that it took decisive confidence to do that well. And the notebook contained advice on how to develop that, much of which I'm still learning.

When Ms. Hochul gave me my first real job, she also taught me how to function in an office. She coached me on how to make myself heard in a roomful of older, more experienced professionals. As I leaned over her shoulder, she edited the materials I wrote for her, honing and sharpening my voice. And when I left her congressional campaign before the election to take a job as a newspaper reporter, she championed my decision.

Mentoring makes a difference, especially for women

“I want the women that I mentor around me to see those possibilities, how they can make a difference when someday they’re in charge,” Ms. Hochul, now New York’s lieutenant governor, said. “I want them to have a more expansive view of their potential. And to me, mentoring is all about letting them see and then helping them find the path to get there.”

While mentoring benefits all participants, it is especially important for young women. A 2015 study from the University of California Haas School of Business found that women gained more social capital from affiliation with a high-status mentor than their male counterparts did. The Department of Labor reports that today, 57 percent of women participate in the work force. As work force demographics continue to change, encouraging mentors and mentees to seek one another out might be more important than ever.

Why mentoring works

Mentorship advances careers. A study in the Journal of Applied Psychology found that people with mentors are more likely to get promotions. That’s no accident. Jenni Luke, chief executive of the national teen mentorship organization StepUp, knows that those relationships can help propel young women to success.

“When I go into a room full of people and I say, ‘Raise your hand if you’ve gotten your job through somebody,’ every hand goes up,” Ms. Luke said. “Every single person on earth has social capital, and you want to use it with intentionality.”

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When mid- and senior-level employees choose to mentor someone newer to the work force, they can boost people who may not otherwise have those opportunities and help level the playing field.

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Many companies are “hiring in these kinds of closed networks,” Ms. Luke said. “And unless you’re willing to really understand that and open up your networks,” she added, “the network of folks coming into jobs continues to narrow.”

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Mentorship also exposes both parties to new ideas and perspectives. Arlene Kaukus, the director for career services at the University at Buffalo, said she believed that was becoming more and more important, as workplace demographics continue to change.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2024 less than 60 percent of the work force is likely to define itself as “white non-Hispanic.” Latinx people could comprise 20 percent of the labor force in 2024. The proportion of African-Americans in the work force is also projected to rise, to 12.7 percent in 2024 from 12.1 percent in 2014, and the proportion of Asians to 6.6 percent in 2024 from 5.6 percent in 2014.

“The importance of being able to see things from different people’s points of view based on their life experience, their culture, their ethnicity, their gender, becomes even more important,” Ms. Kaukus said.

What mentoring does for the mentors

Ms. Luke emphasized that mentoring should not be paternalistic. “It’s very much reciprocal, and there’s so much to be learned from the younger generation,” she said. Both sides are “meeting different types of people, understanding different experiences, and really growing their own network of young, up-and-coming professionals to be able to support or to be able to offer opportunities.”

Ms. Kaukus, who also volunteers as a mentor to international students, said she also learned a lot from those she mentors. It affords mentors “an opportunity to reach back and continuously develop talent and pay back for the wonderful extension of mentorship that perhaps they were granted at some point in their career,” she said. “I think that is a powerful motivator. And it’s also a powerful benefit for the mentor.”

Don’t get stuck looking for mentors only at work

While formal mentorships used to be de rigueur in the business world, they have fallen by the wayside. A Harvard Business School study on mentoring found that every professional over 40 could name a mentor, but only a few younger interviewees could. The solution: reimagining how employees find mentors, and how those relationships function.

Katherine Brodsky, a freelance journalist and director of Random Minds PR, started a private mentoring group to help people feel connected to others at all stages of their careers. “Often, knowing how to get from Point A to Point B is mystifying, but when you see people who have succeeded in your field and get to learn about their journey, it takes the mystical element out of it,” she said.

In particular, seeking mentors outside your team at work can provide a “safe space” to ask questions you might not feel comfortable asking a manager or someone to whom you report directly. That open, honest relationship can help people feel more supported both at work and, as Ms. Kaukus pointed out, in life.

“It’s always good to get somebody else’s point of view, because sometimes we drill down on things,” she said. “I think so often, when we’re engaged in a conversation, we’re so busy thinking about what we need to say, perhaps we’re really not thinking about what the other person might be thinking, feeling, experiencing.”

She does a lot of role-playing to help those who are mentored workshop professional interactions. She said it was helpful to see “how that interplay is very different depending on which side of the conversation you’re sitting on.”

What makes a mentorship effective?

While anyone can serve as a mentor, effective mentors cultivate some key traits. “The mentors that our girls love the most are the ones that are great listeners, that see their potential and are willing to support them, come hell or high water,” Ms.

Luke said. “If I’m not sharing with you the specific experiences that have helped shape my opinion on how to do things, then I’m not really helping you.”

Clarity and communication are also mutually important. “It helps to really know your concrete goals that you’re working toward,” Ms. Brodsky said. “You should also be clear with the mentor as to why you’re meeting them, and what you’re hoping to gain.”

Ms. Kaukus recommended telling a potential mentor why you chose them in particular. What about that person’s career, personality or profession drew you to them?

And Ms. Luke emphasized that there was really no one “right” way to seek or engage in a mentoring relationship, provided it remains respectful and open. “As long as you’re willing to let the relationship evolve in the way that it can, based on everyone’s time constraints and the way that the communication works best for the two of you, I think there’s no one, right structure,” she said.

How to get started

If you’re looking to be a mentor or to be mentored, check in with your human resources department and look to professional organizations you may already belong to as a starting point. Ms. Kaukus also advised those who are part of a college or alumni network not to forget those connections.

For those looking to mentor others, Ms. Hochul said not to discount your ability to mentor not only formally, but by leading by example. If others “can look at how I overcame life’s challenges, and if that helps them get over those hurdles easier, then, to me, that is enormously satisfying,” she said. “I’ve got to know that our time made a difference,” and if we spent it “inspiring the next generation, then mission accomplished.”

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