

6 factors you must consider when choosing a mentor

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Working with a mentor can , but that doesn't mean you should jump into the first relationship that comes across your path. Take time to evaluate the opportunity, your willingness to commit and your potential mentor. Choosing the right mentor is critical. You'll have to do the legwork to decide if this mentor is right for you. Here's what you need to keep in mind.

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1. Determine exactly what you need.

What skills do you need to learn right now versus in a year from now?

Careerdevelopment is never linear, the same mentor who can support you today may not have the skills to help you five years from now. That's why you need to analyze your current development needs before your future ones.

Your mentor needs to help you succeed in the present before grooming you for the future. Tackle your professional development one step at a time. A 12- to 18-month timeline for a mentor and mentee relationship is often most effective.

2. Weigh the mentor's strengths and weaknesses.

Especially as they relate to your style.

Don't bend over backward changing your work style to accommodate a someone else's lessons. You can spend your energy in better ways. Nobody is perfect - not me, not you and not your potential mentor. Is this person going to complement your style or clash with it?

Look for these qualities to start:

- Empathy
- Honesty and practiced communications skills
- Lateral thinking
- Lifelong dedication to learning

3. Are your world views and philosophies aligned?

You can't force this.

Take a good, hard look at your proposed mentor's outlook on life, your field and company's values before committing. The odds of finding someone who matches you 100 percent are slim and a moot point if you are going to grow into an -improved and therefore different -- version of yourself over time. Focus on life philosophies, such as: learning, determination, thoughtfulness and trust.

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4. The mentor must be a good listener.

Mentors are like hiking guides. They haven't always experienced the same paths that you have taken, and they shouldn't spoon-feed answers to you even if they have. Instead, they need to help mentees overcome their challenges without taking the reins directly. This comes back full-circle to empathy and communication skills - in the form of listening.

If this person helps you to develop your own answers with insights rather than just their own strong opinions then you may be on to something. On the

other hand, a mentor who does most of the talking and turns away your ideas regularly is a poor bet.

Ultimately you want someone who knows when to give you a reality check, who can tell you to go for it when the time is right and who helps you to reflect on the most important lessons - even if it means the occasional setback. Your mentor needs to let you scrape your knees now and again to let you learn from your failures, but also pull you back from the edge of the precipice when you're about to step off the edge. And this mentor-to-be can't do any of that without practiced listening skills.

5. Does this person challenge you?

They should. You won't learn anything new if your mentor doesn't get you to consider new perspectives. Keeping in mind that your mentor should share broad philosophies with you, think very carefully about this person's ability to bounce ideas back and forth with you too. You want someone who shares similar threads of experience with you - be it the approaches they took or the challenges they overcame in the past.

Younger people can make the mistake that mentors know better simply because they claim seniority. Those mentors rarely ever succeed, even if they think otherwise. But it's important that anyone seeking out a mentor understands the difference between someone who deliberately teaches mentees by challenging their stances when it counts instead of dismissing their ideas routinely.

6. Can you return the favor?

Mentors are supposed to get value out of your relationship as well as you.

And some of these are obvious - gaining a successor, a new pillar of management in the company or a new business connection. But like the rest of us, mentors have their own immediate needs and priorities.

It pays to give back to your mentors, as they will be inclined to stay engaged in the relationship for longer. Successful mentorships are two-way streets in which the mentor learns new things as well - not by calling on the same experience that a mentor brings, but by bringing insights about new developments not present when the mentor was younger.

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Choosing the wrong mentor can set back your career instead of fast-tracking it. Be strategic about what you need to learn, make sure your styles complement each other, and bring something to the table in exchange for teaching you to learn from failure. Choosing the right mentor can be the most important career decision you'll ever make.