

## 6 tips to be a better mentor

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Many employees ask for mentorship—and many leaders know vaguely that they're supposed to mentor. But too often, mentorship ends up being two people talking in platitudes and sneaking glances at the clock.

When done well, mentoring can be rewarding for everyone involved: Mentees develop their strengths and meet their professional goals, while mentors hone their coaching and communication skills—and reap the satisfaction of helping someone grow.

Whether you participate in a formal mentorship program or simply counsel a direct report, these tips can help you improve the experience for both of you.

### 1. Define what you and your mentee want out of the relationship to be sure you're a good match.

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Lots of formal mentorship programs start by asking participants what they hope to gain by being a mentor or mentee—and for good reason. Good matches lead to productive relationships, while bad ones leave both parties wondering, *Am I wasting my time?*

Even if you're not in a formal mentorship program, it's worth asking yourself, *What do I hope to gain by being a mentor? What do I want to learn from my mentee? What skills or connections can I offer? Do I have time to meaningfully contribute to the relationship?* And be sure to ask your mentee to detail what they want from the mentorship, too.

If you have what they need—for example, years of experience in the organization so they can better navigate internal politics or mastery of a skill in order to move up—you may be a match! If your interests or expertise don't line up, you might not be the right person to help. And look for signs that your mentee has specific goals and is motivated to learn from you, too.

### 2. With your mentee, choose a goal they're working toward and create a roadmap for how you'll help them achieve it.

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A roadmap can help you both stay on track—and keep your meetings from petering out or stretching on endlessly without progress (a common trap).

Let your mentee's needs and career aims guide the process. This isn't the time to be a strong leader pushing for goals you think will lead to the best outcome—it's about you helping them achieve what they want. So, for example, if your mentee is interested in improving their development plan, figure out how you can help them shape it and help them advocate for it with their manager.

Your roadmap could include:

- **A clear definition of success.** How will your mentee know when they've met their goal? What milestones will they need to hit along the way? And how will you know when you've done all you can to help them?
- **A regular communication cadence.** Agree on how often you and your mentee will meet and schedule the time. If your mentee is on your team, you could suggest devoting part of their 1-on-1s to mentorship conversations.
- **Checkpoints to see how things are going.** In addition to tracking progress toward goals, check in periodically about the mentorship itself by asking your mentee questions like, *“What do you think we should be spending more or less time on? How helpful are the resources I've been giving you? What topics would you like to cover that we haven't discussed?”*

### 3. Ask questions to understand your mentee's perspective before offering advice.

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*“I've been in this exact situation—here's what you should do ...”*

It's easy to assume that you know what your mentee needs. Especially if you have a lot in common, their circumstances may feel very familiar. And you succeeded, right? But your mentee has their own goals, strengths, preferences, and personality, and they're dealing with different people at a different point in time. What worked for you may not work for them, or even be what they want. So, before you can help, you need to understand.

Avoid leading questions (e.g. “Don't you think you should ...?”) or suggestions veiled in the form of a question (e.g., “Have you tried ...?”). And keep your tone curious and non-judgmental.

Examples:

- *“What's the outcome you're looking for in this situation?”*
- *“Tell me about the people involved—what do they care about most?”*
- *“What have you tried so far? How did it go?”*
- *“What's the hardest part about this situation? What opportunities do you see?”*

Once you've listened and understand their situation, you can shift toward offering advice. But remember: Your job isn't necessarily to tell your mentee how to solve their problem—it's to help them find their *own* best solution. For more, see [How to coach someone](#).

#### **4. Share context and connections to help your mentee navigate the organization and their career.**

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Good mentoring is about more than talking about your mentee's goals over coffee. It's also about helping them understand how things work in your field or your organization (or theirs, if they work for another company). The knowledge you've cultivated through your position and tenure can help them see career possibilities they hadn't considered and build their skills in navigating company norms.

For example, if your mentee wants to become a manager in your organization, what can you share about how decisions get made, who holds formal and informal power, and other organizational dynamics that affect who gets promoted? Could you connect them with potential allies who are influential in your company? Or, if your mentee is outside your organization, could you help them pick up on cues they may not see, like what might be behind their boss's reluctance to discuss promotion paths?

Other resources you can provide your mentee include:

- Introducing them to relevant people in your professional network
- Recommending books, events, or classes to broaden their horizons (even better, read or attend them together and discuss them afterward)

#### **5. Use feedback to help them work through their challenges and make progress on their goals—without being too directive.**

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A mentor-mentee relationship is slightly different from the relationship you have with a direct report. You're not evaluating your mentee's performance, but you are trying to set them up for a good evaluation by others. You can give your perspective, but ultimately they need to make their own decisions and mistakes. Your most important work as a mentor is supporting your mentee where they are by giving honest, constructive feedback.

For example, if your mentee is applying for a big promotion, you might take them through a practice interview, then offer feedback and pointers (e.g., "*If I were the hiring manager in this situation, I'd want a candidate to be curious about my top priorities—consider asking a question about those*"). Or, if they've experienced a setback like a reputation-damaging mistake, your feedback might focus on tactics that have worked for you to repair trust and that seem likely to work in their situation.

And remember to give an ample mix of encouragement and pointers for improvement. If you tell your mentee only how wonderful they are, you won't help them grow. And if you focus only on how they can improve, your mentee could get discouraged and may not understand what they're already doing well.

## **6. Open up about your past failures.**

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Mentors (like many leaders) sometimes think that they should seem wise and flawless to those less experienced. But you've learned a lot from your mistakes, and your mentee probably can, too—if you're willing to share the gory details.

By doing so, you might help them avoid some of the painful lessons you learned the hard way and help them build confidence to try things outside their comfort zone. After all, you screwed up—but look what you learned from it and where those lessons ultimately got you!

How you share matters: Relate the story to something similar they're going through or about to embark on. Be honest about the extent of your failure, without exaggerating how much or how quickly you learned from it. And emphasize the upside—what (and how) you changed as a result.

For more, see [This week, share a relevant failure of yours and what you learned from it.](#)

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