

Making an Ongoing Mentoring Relationship Stronger and More Productive

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Every mentoring relationship must find its own equilibrium and path. As time passes the partners will get to know each other, and a stronger personal relationship will develop.

As the relationship progresses, there are several things that mentor and mentee can do to make it work better. Effective communication and candid feedback are key. Both partners should try to ensure time is used as effectively and efficiently as possible. And, both mentor and mentee should monitor the learning process and progress, to ensure that the mentee's learning goals are going to be reached.

The Art of Positive Feedback

One of the most important aspects of a mentoring relationship is how the mentor provides advice and feedback to the mentee, and how the mentee responds to that communication.

Giving feedback in a positive and constructive way is often difficult for mentors. At the same time, receiving that feedback without getting defensive is often difficult for mentees. To ensure it is well received, feedback should be thoughtful, specific, timely, candid, and constructive. When considering how to frame communication with a mentee, focus on the mentor's key role: to nurture the mentee's growth by facilitating an accepting, open and affirming learning atmosphere.

For example, when asked a question, avoid the temptation to instantly offer an answer. Instead, work at listening to the question and understanding the issue with which the mentee is struggling.

Then challenge the mentee to think the question through to a solution. Using open-ended questions that start with “how” or “what” often help direct the mentee to the answer. This technique will help the mentee develop the ability to critically think through problems and arrive at a solution on their own.

Finally, celebrate the successes, and don't shy away from talking about the failures, and what can be learned from them. This will help the learning process and build the mentee's confidence. With patience and time, the partners should develop a good rapport and become more comfortable with openly and freely conversing with each other.

Evaluate The Relationship as it Progresses

Once underway, most mentoring relationships require little intervention. To improve the relationship, mentor and mentee should consider meeting at some agreed interval to evaluate how things are progressing.

Ideally the timing of these meetings should be set at the start of the relationship. In the first year, frequent meetings—perhaps every quarter—are likely necessary to help fine-tune the relationship and address minor unanticipated difficulties. Once things are running smoothly, meeting every six months or so is likely sufficient. Of course, unanticipated difficulties would necessitate a meeting.

In preparing for these meetings mentor and mentee should ask themselves the following questions:

- Are we on track to reach the goals of our mentoring relationship?
- What do I think about my mentor/ mentee?
- What is working well, and why?
- What could be working better?
- What changes can be made to make things work better?
- What are we spending too much time on?
- What are we spending too little time on?

- How well are we communicating?
- Is there anything we can do improve our communications?
- Is there anything we can to do more effectively use our time?
- Are there any other changes we can make to improve the relationship?

The mentee, who is the primary beneficiary in the mentoring relationship, should be proactive in making sure that this review process occurs. Evaluating the relationship's progress reminds both partners of its goals, and helps them focus on how to improve the relationship going forward.

This is an excerpt from the Managing a Mentoring Relationship booklet, published by the Lawyers' Professional Indemnity Company.