


1,829 views | Oct 27, 2019, 04:00am

# Don't Assume You Know The Answers: How To Be A Great Mentor



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As a mentor, it is your job to motivate and inspire your mentee GETTY

Ask a successful person to explain how they got where they are today and the chances are that the word ‘mentor’ will crop up somewhere in the conversation. In fact, [some of the most famous leaders in the world](#) have benefited from the mentorship of other leaders at some point in their lives. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was mentored by Apple founder Steve Jobs. His colleague and chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg was mentored by economist Larry Summers. Virgin founder Richard Branson was mentored by airline entrepreneur Sir Freddie Laker.

Acting as a mentor is both a great honor and a great responsibility. With today being National Mentoring Day in the U.K., it seems the right time to consider what it takes to be a great mentor. Here five experts offer their thoughts:

## **1. Remember that to mentor is to inspire**

“All good mentoring begins with inspiration,” says Dr Diana Theodores, director of *Theatre 4 Business*, an international women’s leadership coach and author of *Performing As You: How to have authentic impact in every role you play*. “The overwhelming evidence shows that in order to move others, you have to know what moves *you*. This means having passion and love for your field, subject, or industry, and radiating that enthusiasm into all conversations and communications.

Theodores advises mentors to prepare themselves for a mentoring session by getting into a centered, positive state where they feel connected to their meaning and purpose. “It’s essential to prepare for your conversation by knowing the story of your mentee – their achievements, strengths and key life experiences - and being prepared to share your own personal and motivational stories in return.”

She adds: “For a precious time, you hold your mentee’s aspirations and goals in your hands, so it’s vital to create a receptive environment for listening, exploring and imagining with your mentee – whether face to face or virtually. The job of mentoring is to help your mentee to imagine the possibilities of what they can create and what their successful future might look like; to help them value their own capabilities more than they currently do themselves; and to help them to articulate and execute their own vision.”

At its best, concludes Theodores, mentoring is “creative, empowering, strategic and inspiring”.

## **2. Seek out insights from other sectors**

“Cross-sector relationships are a great source of creative benchmarking, generating fresh insights from organizations that have more in common than you might realize,” says Graeme Reekie, an expert in non-profit business strategy and author of *Making a Lasting Difference: sustaining non-profit organisations and their impact*.

“Businesses and non-profits, for example, operate in similar policy and regulatory environments, with comparable governance, financial and management arrangements in place. But in a cross-mentoring relationship, it is the vital differences that can lead to valuable learning.”

Non-profits can benefit from businesses' analytical rigor in decision-making, separating the head from the heart, continues Reekie. "In return, businesses may learn that having a business case for an initiative is necessary, but not always enough. Purpose and impact are central to non-profit strategy, introducing new ways for businesses to think about and measure effectiveness.

Similarly, non-profits are known for their frugality, so businesses may be surprised by how much they can learn from the creativity and ingenuity that this engenders. "In turn," says Reekie, "when non-profits understand their donors from a business perspective, their fundraising strategies become more customer-focused."

### **3. Don't assume you know the answers**

"When you're asked to be a mentor, it is easy to assume that it is because you have the answers," says Jenny Robinson, a leadership development expert and co-author of *Coaching on the Go*. "However, you first need to be clear about your mentee's needs."

She explains: "As a mentor, your job is to ask invigorating questions, and listen to the answers carefully. You may have answers that worked for you, but your role is to help the mentee explore what works best for them in their own unique circumstances. Avoid the temptation to do it for them – people develop most effectively by testing themselves, so offer strategies rather than solutions."

Robinson also points out that the most effective leaders are those who can bring people together. "As a mentor you will often have a different network to your mentee, so use it to help connect them. Bringing good people together only generates credit for you, so build their network into yours."

Perhaps the most important lesson for a mentor, according to Robinson, is to be a role model. "Great mentors demonstrate and develop skills their mentees can copy. Effective questioning, effective listening and great story-telling are invaluable skills in the workplace, so draw attention to how you act, and you will both grow."

### **4. Share strengths, weaknesses, failures and vulnerabilities**

"Almost universally, mentees are looking for ways to make their lives easier and more productive," argues [Craig Vachon](#), a leading venture capital investor. "Good mentors understand this and they make efforts to accomplish the same."

The mentor-mentee relationship should start with mutual respect and shared values, according to Vachon. “I’d suggest the best relationships have an early step of setting-up and agreeing to expectations through the life of the relationship, sometimes even in writing. Additionally, mentors and mentees need to share strengths, weaknesses, failures and vulnerabilities in order for the relationship to be truly fruitful.”

He continues: “I often ask my mentees to touch base at least once a month. They can contact me anytime, but at a minimum, I want to spend an hour with them to learn the answers to these questions: What is motivating them? What is making them anxious? What is exciting them? And what is holding them back from reaching their goals?”

## **5. Listen empathetically**

When establishing a relationship with a mentee, it’s crucial to develop an empathetic communication style, according to [Colin D Ellis](#), a culture change expert and author of *Culture Fix: How to Create a Great Place to Work*.

“This starts with listening,” says Ellis. “I don’t just mean taking notes of what a mentee is saying or nodding politely every now and then, but actually trying to find out what a mentee isn’t telling you.”

Ellis explains that listening is a three-stage process. “Firstly, you need to not only hear what a mentee is saying, but also, *how* they are saying it too,” he says. “So many cues are lost when we’re not present and watching how information is relayed.

“The second part is to process that information against what you know about a mentee. What’s going on in work right now? What issues are they facing? What opportunities do they have? Without having built a relationship with the mentee, then the third stage becomes almost impossible and that’s to respond appropriately.

Ellis points out that at some times it is appropriate for a mentor to be a listening post for their mentee, while at other times they will need to motivate or inspire. “Hardest of all will be to ensure they are showing the courage required to progress as planned – which is, after all, what mentors are there to help with.”

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