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10 Quick Ideas for Becoming a More Effective Mentee

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Mentorship is often studied from the perspective of the mentor, but here are ten quick ideas for becoming an effective mentee.

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Innumerable studies and books have been written, and many conversations have been had, about mentorship. In fact, the amount of information that is available on how to be an effective mentor is almost overwhelming. However, for those who are seeking a mentor, the experience can be different. There seems to be an unstated assumption that being a mentor is active while being a mentee is passive. Perhaps this assumption needs to be challenged.

The benefits of a mentoring relationship are undeniable. Effective mentoring can lead to career success in the form of promotions, raises, and new opportunities.[1] Being a mentor encourages self-reflection. It can also help a person improve their communication skills and expand their professional network—competencies that carry far beyond the person-to-person mentorship relationship.[2] For an organization, having a mentorship program can result in higher employee engagement, stronger employee retention, and increased collaboration.[3] Companies like Google, GE, Boeing, and Caterpillar (just to name a few) boast about the influence that their mentorship programs have had on their organizational cultures and effectiveness.

Amid this strong evidence, though, exists a potentially harmful assumption for anyone who is seeking a mentor. Mentoring would seem to be a good thing in and of itself, but most research has focused on the impact of being mentored without describing how the relationship operates. For example, a poorly designed or implemented mentorship program may honor outdated models of work and cause more harm than good. Poor experiences can cause the mentor and the mentee to have negative emotional and psychological reactions as well as poor feelings about their respective organizations.[4]

One important aspect that distinguishes successful mentorship experiences from unsuccessful ones is how they are designed. The best versions are intentional and focused. They create the expectation and space for mentees to take ownership of their experiences instead of

relying on their mentors to "take them under their wing." Through a survey and multiple interviews with mentors and mentees, the EDUCAUSE professional learning team sought to discover the most important things mentees can do to help ensure they have a positive mentorship experience. Here are ten actions for mentees to consider:

1. **Drive the relationship.**
   Mentees should drive the mentorship relationships. Oftentimes, mentees and mentors believe that a mentor, as the senior person in a company or group, should maintain the relationship, but in reality, mentees are often in a better position to do this. Mentees should set goals to review with their mentors, agree on the amount of time each person can invest, and suggest how they would like to work with their mentors. Driving the relationship may be uncomfortable at first but doing so will keep the focus on the mentee's needs.

2. **Balance formal and informal mentoring.**
   Mentees should work intentionally to balance formal and informal mentoring. Our survey showed that mentees benefitted nearly as much from mentors who were formally assigned to them through a work program as they did from mentors who acted informally by doing things such as providing feedback after a meeting, reviewing a project, or having a conversation over coffee. Effective mentees should be on the lookout for mentors in all spaces.

3. **Seek the most personal means to connect.**
   In the world today, people often default to impersonal methods of communication, such as emails, text messages, or Slack conversations. Respondents to our survey almost unanimously spoke about the benefit of mentees asking for more personal ways to communicate. In-person meetings, shared meals, or virtual meetings make mentors and mentees feel more valued, but mentees may need to ask directly for such time.

4. **Be courageous.**
   An effective mentee is a courageous mentee. Mentees should ask questions even if the answers may seem obvious. They should

make it clear through words and actions that mentors can openly give them feedback—even if it is critical. Mentees should understand that setbacks are learning experiences and be willing to stand in the discomfort of growth even when doing so is challenging.

5. **Be clear about the ask.**
   Mentees who grow the most as a result of the mentorship experience are often the clearest on what they want and need from it. Mentees should be specific about their goals and articulate how mentors can help them the most. Even if mentees are not yet clear on either, they should be clear that they are unclear. Mentees should not be afraid to let their mentors know that they need to brainstorm.

6. **View feedback as a gift.**
   Mentees know that feedback—whether it is positive or negative—is a gift. Feedback requires people to manage their egos and be open. Mentees should assume their mentors have the best intentions and recognize that their feedback is also a gift. Mentees who struggle to accept feedback from their mentors may find it helpful to talk with their mentors about how they would like to receive feedback. This may help mentors to grow as well.

7. **Provide value.**
   Mentees should recognize their capacity to provide value to their mentors and identify opportunities to provide value by learning about their mentors' interests and connecting the dots. This could mean sending their mentor an article based on a discussion, attending a speaking engagement, or just listening when their mentor may need an ear.[5]

8. **Be prepared.**
   Each time a mentee interacts with their mentor in a formal way, they should have a plan. Mentees should always arrive with an agenda and questions to ensure the meeting is productive and be willing to adjust as needed.

9. **Have realistic expectations.**

Mentees know that everyone is a superhero in their own right, but mentors most likely put their capes on for emergencies instead of wearing them all day, every day. Give mentors space and grace to be human. No one is perfect, including mentors (and mentees shouldn't want mentors to be perfect).

10. **Show gratitude.**
Giving thanks may not be formally required in a mentoring program; however, it is always welcomed. Mentors are sharing their time, knowledge, and resources in an effort to help their mentees advance. Mentees should express gratitude and provide specific feedback about how their mentors have impacted their professional lives.

A mentoring relationship is a symbiotic experience that can pay dividends in the long run. Getting the most out of the experience will require an investment of time and action to see results. Once a mentee has advanced in their career, they should be sure to return the favor and make an investment in another promising individual. No one knows better than a mentee the impact such an investment can have.

For more information about enhancing your skills as a higher education IT manager and leader, please visit the EDUCAUSE Review *Professional Development Commons* blog as well as the **EDUCAUSE Career Development** page.

The *PD Commons* blog encourages submissions. Please submit your ideas to **pdcommons@educause.edu.**

Notes

1. **"Workplace Loyalties Change, but the Value of Mentoring Doesn't,"** ⬈ *Knowledge@Wharton*, May 16, 2007. ↩

2. Louise Howard, **"The Benefits of Being a Mentor,"** *The Professional Development Commons*, (blog), *EDUCAUSE Review,* May 11, 2018. ↩

3. Julie Silard Kantor, **"Four Key Benefits of Workplace Mentoring Initiatives,"** ⬈ *Huffpost*, March 11, 2016. ↩

4. Mel Jones, **"Why Can't Companies Get Mentorship Programs Right?"** ⬈ *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2017. ↩

5. Scott Mautz, **"12 Keys to Being a Super Mentee (The Kind of Mentee Every Mentor Loves),"** ⬈ *Inc.*, May 17, 2017. ↩

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