



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H05D1E
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
JANUARY 21, 2020

ARTICLE **MANAGING YOURSELF**

How to Build a Great Relationship with a Mentor

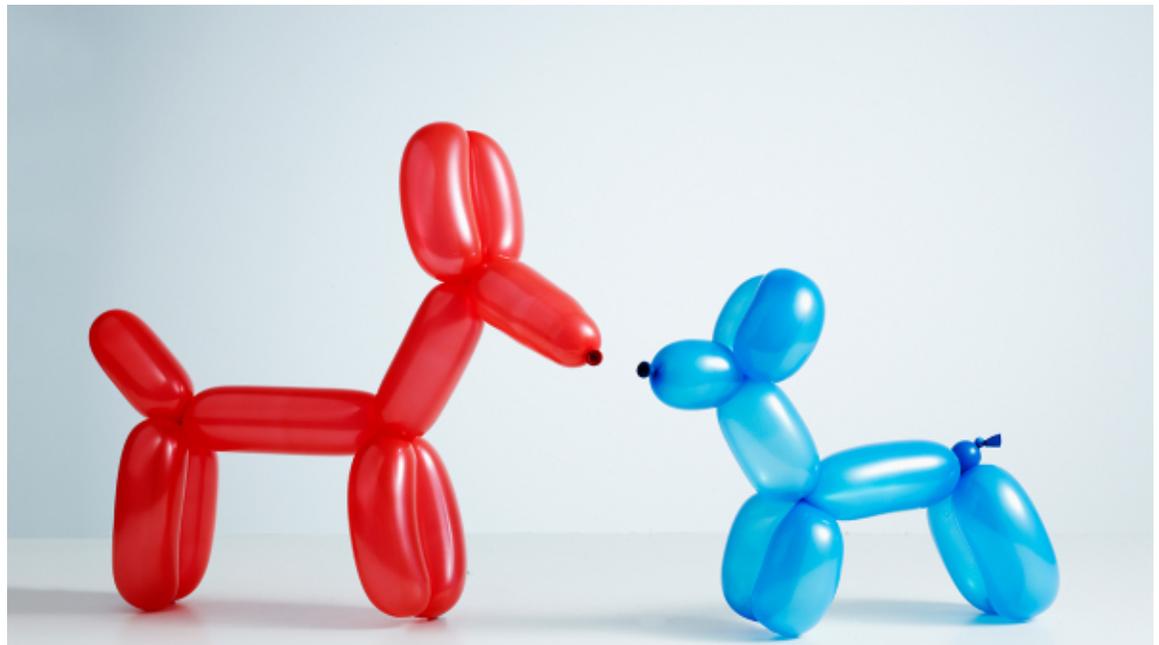
by Mark Horoszowski

MANAGING YOURSELF

How to Build a Great Relationship with a Mentor

by Mark Horoszowski

JANUARY 21, 2020



INFLUX PRODUCTIONS/GETTY IMAGES

The [research](#) on the power of mentorship is pretty clear: People with mentors perform better, advance in their careers faster, and even experience more work-life satisfaction. And [mentors benefit](#), too. After all, “to teach is to learn twice.” Despite all these benefits, and [even though](#) 76% of working professionals believe that a mentor is important to growth, more than 54% do not have such a relationship.

The problem is often that people don't know how to find a mentor or establish a relationship. The following eight steps can help.

1. Define your goals and specific needs.

Get out a pen and paper, and write out your career goals. Make sure they are **SMART**. Then, list out some of the biggest obstacles to achieving them. This specificity will help you decide what type of mentor you should be looking for. Maybe you need to develop new skills, expand your network in a specific sector, or build confidence to have some tough conversations. By first understanding where you want to be, as well as the biggest opportunities and gaps to getting there, you'll identify how a mentor can truly be helpful to you.

2. Write the “job description” of your ideal mentor.

Equipped with your goals and what you need to help achieve them, think through how a mentor can help. Write out the type of mentor that can help you seize your biggest opportunities and/or navigate your challenges. Be specific here. Perhaps you need someone that can help you accomplish a project, make introductions to people at a certain level within a specific industry, or coach you through a tough negotiation. In your job description, make sure to also include the “why” – just like companies want potential hires to understand the bigger purpose of their firm, explain why mentoring you will tap into something bigger. Make sure you include this job description when you reach out to potential mentors, so they know why you're asking for a mentor and are more willing to help (covered in the 4th and 5th steps).

3. Search for mentors through your second-degree network.

Mentors can be from anywhere. They can be from your LinkedIn network, professional connections, or people you've met at conferences. It's important to remember that while people are certainly busy, being asked to be a mentor is a massive compliment. People might say no, but it will be a positive exchange and you shouldn't be shy about thinking big and making the asks, even if you think there is no way the person can find time for you. Let them be the judge of that.

4. Make the ask (and keep it simple).

Asking someone to be your mentor the first time, second time, and even third time is a little awkward. It's likely you've never been asked to mentor someone else, nor taught how to make the ask for yourself. Embrace the uncomfortable feeling and be vulnerable. There is no harm that can come from asking, but take it slow. Ask someone for a first conversation to learn more about their work and interests. Once you learn more about each other, if there is an alignment, then make the bigger ask for mentorship. Asking someone cold to be a mentor with a long email is too much to take in.

5. Have a first meeting.

You have two goals for your first conversation with your potential mentor. First, you need to determine if this person is really the right mentor for you. Then, find out whether they are open to

the idea of mentoring you. How you approach the conversation will depend on you, but in general, you'll want to do these few things:

- Make it easy for the person. Go to a location convenient for them, have a coffee (or tea) waiting, come prepared, and make the meeting no-pressure and comfortable.
- Spend time getting to know the person. You probably want to talk less than 30% of the time.
- It's okay to ask for small favors out of the gate. In fact, [it might even help](#) you build the relationship.
- Make a clear ask: "I've really enjoyed this conversation. Would it be okay if I followed up with you again in one month after I make some progress towards my goals?"
- Say thank you, and then follow-up again over email to say thank you again.

6. Start simply.

For your next meeting, keep it simple and follow up based on your last encounter. Once the person confirms they will meet with you again, send an email proposing an agenda and hinting at the idea of a longer-term relationship. Something like: "In our next chat, I hope we have a quick catch-up, and then I'd love to further expand on our conversation from last time. I'll come prepared with some specific questions that I think you could help me answer."

7. Create a structured accountability process with a mentorship agreement.

After you have a simple conversation or two, try making a more formal ask: Would the person be willing to sit down with you once a month for the next six months until you achieve your goal or solve your problem? If so, then consider creating a simple one-page document outlining what you will accomplish in those six months together. While it might seem a bit overkill, it will help add clarity to you and to your mentor by helping share the goal of the relationship. It will also help you set a clear agenda for each meeting. You can suggest it by saying: "I truly appreciate your time, and I really want to make sure I'm making the most of it. I was thinking that I could prepare a simple document that would share my goals with you, my commitment to you, and what milestones I hope to achieve in the next three months. I think it will help hold me accountable to come prepared to our conversations. Would you be okay with that?"

8. Continue to follow-up and say thank you.

You should definitely send a thank-you note after every meeting. Beyond that, once your mentorship arrangement comes to a close, you should continue to say thanks. I once had a mentee email me two years after our partnership. It made my week! In exchange, I was also able to help make some new and interesting connections, and she the same. So remember, it's okay to [ask for a favor](#), just make sure to show proper appreciation!

Mark Horoszowski is the cofounder and CEO of MovingWorlds.org. He also serves as a volunteer with the American Cancer Society, cochairing its National Volunteer Leadership Advisory Team.
