

The Mentor: Finding a Mentor

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Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection, and professional growth.

In my last column, I discussed the difference between an advisor, a sponsor and a mentor as described by Carla Harris in *Expect to Win* (2009). A mentor is the person you trust to keep your confidences with which you develop a personal relationship. You tell them “the good, the bad and the ugly” and they respond with honest feedback about your behavior and strategies in context with your strengths, weaknesses, background, and career aspirations.

Some of the most effective mentorships are informal and serendipitous, as mine have been. Ideally in a large organization, someone within the organization will take an interest in you and take the lead in developing a relationship. However, many of us in library and information science work in very small libraries or institutions and may not have obvious opportunities to develop a mentoring relationship naturally. If you need to seek out a mentor, how do you do that? What characteristics are critical?

First and foremost, this is someone with which you share confidences, who can respond honestly in the context of your strengths and weaknesses. This needs to be someone you know, who knows you. You need to trust them to keep your “good, bad and ugly” to themselves.

Other characteristics of a good mentor vary across sources, but the following tend to be common. A good mentor:

- Is a good listener, empathetic, and non-judgmental
- Is focused on *you* and has your best interests at heart in all of your dealings
- Gives you honest advice that is tailored to you and relevant to your situation
- Asks questions that lead you to your own conclusions rather than providing you with answers
- Complements your style and has similar values and world views
- Challenges you to consider new perspectives
- Is committed to lifelong learning and the development of others
- Has sufficiently more experience than you to be valuable, but not so much that their experiences are irrelevant for you

Formal mentoring relationships can be successful, but you should not share all of your fears, mistakes, or concerns with an assigned mentor until you know them and are sure you will be able to develop trust and a long term relationship with them. If you are in a situation where a mentor is assigned, make sure you understand the purpose of the relationship. An assigned mentor is often more like an Advisor – someone who gets you oriented to an institution or organization - which is different than the type of

mentor we are talking about here.

Ultimately, *you* need to define the qualities you need in a mentor. Recognize that mentoring relationships can be life-long affairs and be strategic about what you want to learn. If you are not sure that someone will be a good fit, try approaching them as an Advisor and see if the individual is a good fit for mentoring. If the answer is yes, ask them if they are willing.

When you find the person you want as a mentor, be clear about what you are asking them to do and your expectations about what you would get out of the relationship. Don't be too disappointed if they say no. Mentoring is time intensive, and good mentors put a lot of in depth attention into their mentee's career. Perhaps that person is willing to serve as an Advisor while you continue to seek the mentor you need.

In my next column, I'll talk about managing the relationship and setting expectations.

Sources:

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