

## CHAPTER 3

# Locating a Mentor

If you have only a few minutes to skim over this chapter, this is what you should focus on:

- Why you need a mentor
- A mentor checklist

### Why You Need a Mentor

All successful mountaineers need to select their guides carefully. These guides in the business world are your mentors. It always amazes me, when I address an audience, how few people have a mentor. Your mentors will help prepare you for the challenges ahead and save you from falling into crevasses. The different visions that people in management have are as varied as the mountains around the world. You may wish to be a senior manager in an international bank, a CEO of a fast-growing technology company, or a CEO of a major multinational. But the pathway to each of these positions is quite different:

- The CEO of a bank would require at least ten years of banking experience, including multinational banking in the major financial centers.
- A CEO of a fast-growing technology company would need to have demonstrated entrepreneurial skills and the ability to relate to technology staff; they might possibly (but not necessarily) need over five years of sector experience.
- A CEO of a major multinational would need blue-chip experience with other similar-sized multinationals.

Most of us recognize that we need to seek advice. The problem is that we are often not selective enough when we start to pour out our problems to untrained ears. Your best friend, parents, or work colleagues may not

be skilled enough to give you the balanced feedback you need for your career.

The answer is very easy: Find an “Obi-Wan Kenobi,” someone who will coach you to find the “force within you.” Typically, these mentors reek wisdom; they are wise owls who have seen it all before and are gracious enough to merely raise an eyebrow when you talk about some madcap action you are about to take. They talk you through it and let the enlightenment strike by itself.

One corporate accountant I know was offered some confidential information about intended legislation. The legislation that was going to be passed affected his organization. Instead of thinking about the ramifications of receiving the information and talking with his mentor, he let curiosity win the day and looked at the document. The information was so hot that as soon as he read it he realized that he would now have to disclose the information to his company colleagues, who were duty-bound to disclose it to the stock market. The massive fallout in the press had the corporate accountant as the guilty party for the drop in share price. The corporate accountant was roasted in front of a governmental subcommittee and featured for over a week on the front pages.

Richard Branson, a modern-day hero, consulted with Freddie Laker before he went into the airline industry. The advice he was given helped him avoid the pitfalls that proved too much for Laker Airways, the pioneers of the cheap travel we have today.

In this day and age, only the foolish venture forward without having a mentor supporting them from behind the scenes. A mentor is normally someone older than you, wiser, and with more gray hairs, who knows something about what you are doing. It could be a retired CEO of the business, a retired board member who has known you for a while, a professional mentor, or someone in the sector where there is no conflict of interest.

A good mentor will save your career a number of times. With the advent of email, a career-limiting event is only a “click on the send button” away! The mentor is someone whom you ask, “Please look at this. I am thinking of forwarding it on to the CEO,” to which the mentor replies,



“Let’s have a coffee first before it is sent,” after which, when asked about the email, you reply, “What email?”

Mentors are also well connected and will often further your career during discussions on the 19th hole. Some receive as payment a good meal once a quarter, while others will do it for a living.

## How to Find a Mentor

When looking for a mentor, start at the top and work down. Most successful people are happy to mentor up-and-coming “young guns.” Asking someone to become your mentor is one of the greatest compliments you can give. Exhibit 3.1 will help you find a mentor.

## How to Ask Someone to Be Your Mentor

You can ask someone to mentor you in a number of ways:

“Pat, I would really appreciate the opportunity to meet you over lunch sometime soon to discuss a few work issues. I have the utmost respect for your judgment and experience and I would find such a meeting most valuable.” *There is no need to mention the word mentor because Pat has never been a mentor before.*

“Pat, I have recognized that if I am to grow as a manager I need to seek advice from time to time from wise people. I was wondering



### EXHIBIT 3.1 Mentor Checklist

- |  |                              |                             |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Understands the sector you are in   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2. Has reached a senior position, not necessarily a CEO                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 3. Has had a broad career experience   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 4. Has a quick and incisive mind   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 5. Is a person you look up to and respect  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 6. Is normally significantly older than you  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 7. Has good contacts   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 8. Is well respected by others   | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 9. Is well read  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 10. Is patient and tolerant  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 11. Sees his or her role as mentor as important and thus commits to making meeting dates | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

**(You need to find someone who scores over 6)**



if you could spare a lunch or dinner once every quarter so I can cover issues with you. Occasionally, I might need your thoughts on an urgent matter that I might be having some problems with. My boss is very supportive of this and is happy to pay for the meals and any incidental expenses that you may incur.” *In this situation it is made clear to Pat that this relationship is supported by the company.*

“Pat, I am aware that you are mentoring a few people. I would benefit greatly if this service could be extended to me. My manager has set aside an amount of money for my mentoring. Could I come to see you to discuss how we might make this happen?” *In this scenario Pat is a paid professional mentor, so a more direct approach is possible.*

## Types of Mentors

---

In a very readable book Mick Ukleja and Robert Lorber<sup>1</sup> have talked about four different types of mentors. I give you the four types in their words.

**Upward Mentors:** These are the people to whom you look up. They have helped and are still helping you become who you are. They can be a parent, grandparent, coach, author, pastor, rabbi, or boss. They may be someone you haven’t met.

**Friendship Mentors:** These are the people with whom you experience life. You have gone through various stages with them—college, career, or family, and work life. They are your peers, and you’ve learned from them in a mutually giving way.

**Sandpaper Mentors:** You don’t have to look for them; they always find you! These are people who rub you the wrong way. Don’t reject all that they say simply because they are critical or cranky. In reality they can help you—if you are observant, open, and non-defensive.

**Downward Mentors:** These are the people in whom you are invested. They may be younger than you, but not necessarily. When you invest in others in a giving relationship, you actually learn a lot about yourself. You experience what’s important to you and what should be emphasized and reinforced in your own professional and personal life.

I subscribe to their views and believe that having mentors covering these characteristics will aid you on your journey.

## Some Mentoring Better Practices

---

To give you an idea of mentoring, here are some better practices:

One health-sector organization has established a mentorship program for all managers reporting to the general managers. The program is to support these managers for their first six months until they have developed their own support network. In the past they had found that managers had become isolated, which had led to some questionable decisions and actions.

Government groups have developed a mentoring system where the mentors have received training and meet together to discuss issues that affect their “students.” At first, management did not understand the distinction between a mentor and a manager, but now they accept that a mentor must *not* be in direct line of control of his or her student.

One government group’s graduate program has a mentoring facility for all new recruits. Typically, the graduate will first work for the mentor (who has had a two-day course in mentoring skills); this ensures a good start to the process. The graduate has the same mentor for the ensuing two years, although he or she will have several managers during the period.

We all need heroes. They help create vision and sometimes a piece of their magic rubs off on you. Remember those days when you were young, the dreams of hitting that tennis ball in the Wimbledon final, sinking that last putt on the 18th hole to win the open, or scoring the final goal? You still need those dreams now, but in a different context.

Dreams create visions; visions create spotlights on pathways; pathways get you where you want to be. It is that simple.

Many great heroes, from Alexander the Great to Sir Edmund Hillary, also hero-worshipped. The difference between them and us is that they made their dreams become reality.

## Notes

---

1. Mick Ukleja and Robert Lorber, *Who Are You and What Do You Want?*, PERIGEE, 2009.

