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## CAREER FOCUS

# How (and How Not) to Acquire a Mentor

The mentor–mentee relationship can't be forced; it must develop organically.

**Alan Willner** shares advice for cultivating this bond.

**A**bout 20 years ago, I went to Japan for an OSA conference. While there, I visited the president of Matsushita, for whom my father had worked years before. I gave him a gift, and I inscribed it with the highest praise I could: “You are my father’s cherished mentor.”

Although having a mentor can be valuable at any stage of a person’s career, it can be particularly crucial earlier on. A person should strive to have several mentors since you and your career are multi-faceted and ever-changing. Moreover, mentors are often emotionally bound to the mentee, continuing to provide, as U.S.

politician John C. Crosby phrased it, “a brain to pick, an ear to listen and a push in the right direction,” even after the mentee has progressed in their career.

Mentors do not need to be nice or gentle with you. As a postdoc in Bell Labs, USA, I was quite worried about securing my next job, and my work suffered. Julian Stone, an older, wiser person who cared about my future, came into the lab and metaphorically kicked me in the behind. “Stop moping,” he said. “Just get back to work. That’s the only thing that will really help you.” Sure enough, my best work came in the next few weeks, and I was able to talk about it in my subsequent job interviews.

Young people are often at a loss as to how to find a mentor. This is not surprising since acquiring a mentor is typically not a formal process but rather about cultivating a special relationship. With this in mind, I want to address three critical questions: who is a mentor, how to acquire a mentor, and how *not* to acquire a mentor.

### Who is a mentor?

A role model typically inspires by example, while a mentor commonly has a direct personal connection to the mentee. Mentors can take many forms and help in numerous ways—the relationship is amorphous and person-specific.

In my opinion, a mentor is someone who has experience and wisdom beyond what you possess *and* cares about you and your success. They are willing to help point you in the right direction, give warning about potential pitfalls you might not see coming, and be a sounding board to give feedback on your ideas, options and choices. In all these areas, a mentor offers a subjective opinion, one that is unique to their perspective as they understand you personally. The internet can help find objective advice, but a mentor provides tailored personalized guidance.

### Do: Ask for advice

It is important that a personal relationship is already forming as the seeds of mentorship take root. A mentor-mentee relationship takes time to develop and nurture—such ties can't be forced. They require the right personal chemistry and need to develop organically.

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with to share their opinion, advice and rich professional experiences. When you ask for advice, you show respect, care and admiration—there is almost no downside. When developing the mentor relationship, be genuine, eager, humble, trustworthy, honest and thankful.

Moreover, don't be defensive if you receive constructive criticism—accept it as coming from someone who is trying to help. Remember that you want their open and honest opinion, and that being defensive only makes it harder for them to give it to you. The day you ask for advice and your mentor says

abruptly that “it's all good” is the day you should worry that person may not be truly open with you.

### Do not: Ask for a favor

One of the best ways to fail at establishing this dynamic is to ask for a favor, especially early on. Whereas asking for advice and perspective shows respect, asking for a favor just shows that you want something. Your potential mentor may feel that they only have value to you if they can directly help you, which often is not the case. Advice is relatively low stress for a mentor—doing favors can be much more burdensome. If the only time you call is to ask for a direct favor, odds are that the person will build a wall to protect from being over-asked.

Although you may start by asking for advice, not favors, a true mentor will often end up directly helping you anyway, if they can. Early in my career, for example, I saw Rich Wagner of Bellcore at a conference, and he asked me to be vice-chair of the OSA Optical Communications Technical Group, of which he was chair. This was my first professional activity in OSA. Only later did I find out that Rich had asked Tingye Li for suggestions, and Tingye had whispered my name in his ear. For context, I hadn't asked for any favors of Tingye, other than for him to share his stories, for avuncular advice and to play tennis.

Often, I think, people don't even realize that the mentor relationship is forming—and that's a good thing. Pushing a relationship is rarely a recipe for success. **OPN**

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