

FIND YOURSELF A MENTOR

One of my major bits of advice for all people of color and women in nontraditional environments is to find themselves mentors. (And of course this idea is important for everyone: everyone can benefit from mentoring.) A mentor can be any race or sex or age. You do not even have to *like* him or her—you have a very wide range of people to choose from, including both pleasant people and those you consider to be difficult. Anyone can help you so long as this person is competent and responsible and as long as you respect him or her.

Often young people are told to find *role models*, preferably same-sex, same-race, likable ones, hopefully of the same sexual orientation and value structure. One is told to find this saint and then learn to be like her or him. Saints however are few, (especially ones of the same-sex, same-race, etc.). Therefore, it is easier just to find mentors. Even a crusty grouch can be encouraged to be a mentor, just so long as she or he is honorable and knows more than you do about the topic at hand.

A mentor is a person who comments on your work, criticizing errors and praising excellence. This person sets high standards and teaches you to set and meet your own high standards. A mentor teaches you how the System works. If you are in a hospital, in government, in industry or in academe, you learn the organization chart and also how the place really works. You learn how to succeed in your training, how to succeed in your work, how to be on a team, and how to get promoted on the basis of excellent work.

Mentors teach you which intellectual and business problems are important and how to recognize them yourself. They apprentice you to proposal writing, conference presentation, how to negotiate, how to construct a budget. They introduce you to important networks, talk about your work to others, and help to find you jobs. Initially, they are your evaluators and the linkage to other evaluators. They teach you finally how to set your own goals, how to evaluate yourself realistically and how to succeed.

Some women find it hard to acquire a mentor. Senior women may be exhausted and are occasionally jealous of their uniqueness. Senior men sometimes ignore women. A few will see women as sex objects, or they avoid women *because* women can be seen as “sex objects,” and might take offense. Junior women are often shy. What can junior women do to find a mentor, even if they feel shy?

Many people can be helped to become your mentor. I mean this, of course, not in a Machiavellian, exploitative sense, but in the context of respectful, honest behavior on your part. Take responsibility for finding decent mentors.

First you need to observe carefully what kind of person you are dealing with. Be receptive to advice and counsel offered to you from competent people. However, stay away from people who want to use you or hurt you, even if you are attracted to them. Because “negative” or destructive mentorship is also a possibility, it is important *never to*

engage emotionally with someone who does not care about your welfare, and who cares only about himself or herself. Do not pick fights or respond to provocation from negative mentors. If you can, keep your distance. When possible, stay away from such people, and in any case do not engage emotionally with them.

When you find honorable people who know more than you in any important arena, seek them out. Be both receptive and responsive. You do not want to “use” other people yourself; the reward to others from helping you lies in your own responsiveness and creativity. Thank others for any help you get, give credit with scrupulous care to those who help, *bring credit to your mentors for having sponsored you.* Here are some possible steps:

1. Introduce yourself; make the first contact—always on a professional subject. Go up after a meeting. Write a letter to an expert, asking an important question. Comment on his/her last report or article; send your conference presentation in draft, for comment. (Send something you are proud of).
2. Do it again, respectfully and intelligently.
3. Begin to ask for help about your errors and excellence. Cherish the good advice you are given and thank your mentor when he or she is helpful. Say it even if she or he brushes it off or says “it was nothing.” Be sure you acknowledge all the help you are given.
4. See if you can apprentice yourself to the more senior person on any part of an interesting project, and work hard.
5. As you get to know your mentor, be friendly, open and very professional. Get to know her or his spouse and introduce your own friends as appropriate. Avoid any kind of conflict of interest if you can—stay away from ambiguous situations with respect to intellectual property, personal work, and any interaction that could be construed as unprofessional. Keep yourself appropriately independent. If a lot of work is accomplished, make sure you get reasonable credit for your contributions. Try to be independent enough to move to another job or another city to advance if that becomes necessary.
6. Seek out several mentors if it seems at all appropriate. Nobody is or can be perfect at everything. You will learn different things from different people. Peers and junior colleagues are some of the best mentors you will have.
7. Do whatever you can to help your mentors forever after. Be generous—give credit in public for the help you’ve gotten—and give help to others wherever you can throughout your life. This reinforces good behavior everywhere. It will encourage you to become a first-rate mentor. (And with care and practice you may even become a good role model for mentors.)