

5 Ways to Get the Most Out of a Mentor-Protégé Relationship

Protégés, it's not just about landing your next job—and mentors, there's plenty in it for you, too.

Based on insights from Diane Brink



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Mentorship can be an enormously valuable experience for aspiring and established business leaders alike. Working with a supportive, more experienced colleague can help you develop into the best version of yourself. And guiding a colleague toward their full potential can help you hone your coaching skills while shaping the next generation of leaders.

But whether a relationship develops organically during coffee breaks or stems from a formal [corporate mentorship program](#), many mentors and protégés suffer from misconceptions about the mentoring process—such as the myth that there is only one right way to do it.

“The most important thing that you need to remember about a mentoring relationship is that it’s individual, because it’s about the

person,” says [Diane Brink](#). “There’s not a script or a standard operating procedure.”

Brink was IBM’s Chief Marketing Officer for Global Technology Services until retiring in 2015, and now works as a consultant and Board Director. She also serves as a senior fellow and adjunct professor at the Kellogg School. Over the course of her career, she has mentored dozens of protégés—and had her own mentors as well. Brink draws on that extensive experience to highlight five best practices for mentors and mentees to get the most out of these relationships.

Create a Penalty-Free Environment

The word “mentoring” might bring to mind the image of a student sitting subserviently at the teacher’s knee. Erase that. The mentor might have more experience than the protégé, but this relationship is about the exchange of ideas, rather than the operation of power dynamics.

Brink stresses the importance of creating a comfortable environment so both mentor and protégé can speak candidly and freely.

“The whole idea behind the mentoring relationship is that it’s a penalty-free environment,” she says. “If you don’t create an environment that is open and trusting, you might not necessarily get what’s on a person’s mind. The most important thing you can do is say, ‘Look, we’re just two people getting together. Hopefully, I can share some perspective for you.’”

Commit to the Process

Sharing those perspectives requires commitment from both mentor and protégé. This means making sure you are fully present when you do get together.

“Some mentors fail because they haven’t really embraced the role,” Brink says. “They’re there just to listen, but not to engage. Ask yourself: Are you really there when you’re meeting with your protégé, or are you continuing to multitask all the other things on your calendar? That’s not very helpful.”

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For mentors, being present also gives you a better chance of gaining deeper understanding of the issues your protégé is facing.

“As a mentor, your role is to help guide and facilitate how that individual solves a problem or tackles an opportunity,” Brink says. “You’re asking questions and providing context for greater clarity. You’re not the person who’s going to have all of the answers.”

Let the Protégé Lead

For protégés, commitment means more than sitting back and nodding in agreement with every suggestion the mentor makes. Mentees need to own the relationship.

Brink describes a protégé who would always send an agenda for their mentoring meeting a week beforehand: “I thought ‘Oh, my gosh. This guy is really thinking about not only how he can use my time effectively, but how he can really move the relationship to something that is going to be beneficial for him.’ That was pretty impressive.”

In any mentoring situation, it should be the protégé who sets the priorities. Brink likes to remind mentees that they really drive their own careers.

“You’re going to have a lot of people providing their point of view on what you should be doing with your career,” she says, “and it’s not their decision.”

Agreeing to make the mentee’s agenda a priority keeps him or her from being swayed towards a career path he or she may not be interested in following. And it takes pressure off the mentor to act as an all-knowing guru.

Brink recalls a situation early in her career, when she was offered a position that represented a step up—but that she did not really want. Panicking, she called her then mentor, who told her to follow her gut.

“He never judged me,” Brink says. “He just put it back on me to answer.”

Practice Big-Picture Thinking

The mentor’s chief task is to help the protégé realize his or her potential, offer perspective on problems, develop strengths, and remedy weaknesses. It is not to dig up an immediate promotion. That is something that Brink has had to teach at least one mentee.

“When we met, she sat down, and two minutes into the conversation she started talking about the next job she was going to get and how I was going to help her get there,” Brink recalls. “I had to stop the conversation.”

Instead, Brink likes to encourage her protégés to think about the type of work they see themselves doing several years from now.

“Roles come and go,” she says. “If I look at how the marketing profession has changed in the past 18 months, there are new roles that I couldn’t have even dreamed of. It’s more about: ‘Do you see yourself running a company? Do you see yourself working overseas?’ I think it forces the person to think more broadly about their development plan and the types of potential assignments they should consider.”

Recognize Learning Opportunities

Mentorship offers learning opportunities for both mentors and protégés. For mentors, it is of course satisfying to know that you are contributing to the success of your next-generation colleagues. But the process has more immediately useful rewards as well.

For example, Brink has found that mentoring provides insights into both an organization’s political environment and the effectiveness of an organization in communicating strategy to employees at different levels.

“I might think it’s pretty clear from my seat, but then I might have a [mentoring] conversation and begin to appreciate the fact that wow, this individual missed this aspect of the strategy,” she says. “That’s an important learning, because it helps me to be better at understanding what we need to do to make sure we’ve got the strategy in place.”

There are other potential benefits for mentors. For example, Brink recently mentored a young woman who is a “digital native” with cutting-edge social and digital marketing skills. This relationship helped Brink keep current in a quickly evolving field.

“There was no way, in my role, that I could continue to stay apprised of all the new tools and techniques and applications,” she says. “Just by talking with her, it allowed me to stay current in an area that was interesting to me and essential to my role.”