

Finding the Right Mentor - John Sweetman

Effective mentoring will make a great contribution to your growth and development as a person of influence for God. But how do you find the right mentor? This article looks practically at how to find a mentor that will assist you in your present journey.

Let me say upfront that the perfect mentor does not exist. He lived 2000 years ago. So if you're looking for someone who will meet all your needs for growth, then you're living in fantasy land. There are some wise, spiritual leaders around the place, but none have got it all together. Anyway if there were perfect mentors around they would be looking for perfect mentorees and that would unfortunately exclude you.

Some people are never satisfied with a mentor because they have impossible ideals. It is likely that your mentor will have almost as many shortcomings as you. This will frustrate you, but you need to face up to it.

What are you looking for?

So if no mentor has strengths in every area, you have to decide what kind of mentoring you're looking for. Are you looking for accountability in character issues? Are you looking for reflection on leadership issues? Are you looking for help with ministry issues? Are you wondering about your future? Are you wanting to grow your love for Jesus? Do you want help with skills at work or with skills in church ministry? Would you prefer a friend or a guru? Are you looking for time to reflect together, or some good advice? Your needs will change over time.

The answers to these questions may well overlap, but they will focus your search. If you want to deal with some personality flaws, look for a counsellor-type person. If you want to be more effective as a leader, look for someone who is leading. Of course, the best option is to have a number of mentors who contribute in different ways. But not everyone has that option.

Categories of mentors

Let me elaborate a little on a few of these types of mentors. They, of course, will overlap.

1. *Advisors.* These are mentors with wisdom and a broader perspective. They may not know your area of leadership or ministry really well but they are experienced enough to be able to reflect with you and help you discern strengths of ministry, areas of leadership that need attention, and future direction.
2. *Counsellors.* These are mentors who will work with you on your own issues. They help you discern the personal barriers that stand in the way of spiritual growth and effective leadership, and plot ways forward.
3. *Coaches.* These are mentors who will work with you on personal and ministry goals and hold you accountable to follow through on your commitments. They're like coaches of sporting teams who help devise plans, advise you in implementing the plans, and give honest feedback.
4. *Sponsors.* These are mentors who have networks and contacts that will help your growth in leadership and ministry. They are committed to you and are able to put you in touch with

resources and people that you would normally not have access to. They sponsor your leadership development.

5. *Friends*. These are mentors who are willing to share your journey. They care about what is happening in your life and leadership and will support you and encourage you. They believe in you and provide strength and perspective when you are struggling or doing well.
6. *Reflectors*. These are mentors who have a good knowledge of your area of leadership and of cultures and contexts. They challenge your thinking. They push you to be more thoughtful and creative. They help you grasp a wider perspective.

I'm only using these categories of mentors as examples to help you grasp the nuances in mentoring. Perhaps you can think of mentors who have provided you with the types of mentoring I've described. Perhaps one of these categories stands out to you as something you need right now.

Having decided on the type of mentor you need at the moment, it is important that you look for a mentor who attracts you in this area. It's like marriage. You don't build a mentoring relationship because it's the right thing to do. There has to be a spark. Who attracts you? Who would you like to be like? Who do you want to spend time with? Who challenges you? Who makes you think?

However, I don't want to make things too complicated. Just find someone you think may be able to mentor you and initiate the relationship.

What else is important?

I don't like to add too many more conditions because mentors are hard enough to find and I don't want to make the standard too high. But here are a few other thoughts that may help you find the right person.

Character is so essential to Christian leadership that it's probably not helpful building a relationship with someone who really is not a person of integrity. Oh any mentor will have problems and weaknesses, you can be sure of that, but you're looking for a person with a degree of maturity and character. Watch out for things like judgementalism, dishonesty, impatience, pride, and immaturity. In the end, you won't learn much of value from such people, no matter how able they are.

Look for someone who can be honest. I remember when I was a young senior pastor looking for a mentor who had greater responsibility and experience than I had. I found an excellent guy pastoring a large church and he was willing to spend time with me. Wow! I met with him twice, but was disappointed. All he wanted to do was tell me how wonderful the church and its ministry was. He wouldn't talk about any problems, fears, or challenges that he faced. I never got to really know him. He couldn't be open with me. What a pity. I could have learned so much.

Find someone who can give you time and will make you a priority. I don't mean that you will be their top priority. But mentors who constantly brush you off because they are too busy and who break appointments are not worth the effort. Don't hang on. It's very unlikely that they'll change.

It really helps if your mentor actually listens to you. Some leaders talk a lot and talk well. Maybe you'll get some ideas from their ramblings, but generally you're looking for someone who can hear what you're asking and will reflect on your ideas.

I think that there are plenty of people like this around the place if you're looking for them.

Initiating a relationship

So you have your eye on someone that you would like to mentor you. It could be a friend, an associate, or someone you hardly know. How do you actually initiate the mentoring relationship?

The best way of course is for them to approach you. But there are plenty of reasons why this will not happen. Maybe they don't have a vision for mentoring. Maybe they don't feel like they have anything to offer. Maybe they don't think that you would be interested. Maybe they haven't even considered the possibility. Maybe they're focusing on the tasks they have to do. Maybe they haven't seen your potential.

The chances are that if you sit and wait for someone to offer to mentor you, you're going to be waiting a long time. Even when you do get an offer, it may not be from the type of person you were hoping for. So in reality if you are serious about being mentored, you have to be proactive.

One option is to ask the person to mentor you. This seems pretty obvious and in some cases is the best option. I have been approached many times to provide mentoring and often I have said yes. I know what mentoring is all about and I appreciate the direct approach. If I can't fit it in, I will say no. So if you are sure of who you want as your mentor and can handle possible rejection, go ahead and ask them.

Sometimes it's better to take a more low-key approach. Factors that might make this a better option are:

1. You're not positive it will be a helpful relationship.
2. You're not sure if the person knows how to mentor.
3. You don't know the person very well or he/she doesn't know you very well.
4. You're not confident about making a long-term commitment.
5. Your potential mentor is very busy and may not want further commitments.

In this case, it's better to ask whether you can meet with the potential mentor to talk about some issues. If the meeting proves helpful, you could suggest another get together. At subsequent meetings you could then explore a more permanent arrangement, if both of you are interested.

I am so thankful for the mentors in my life. I doubt whether I would have survived the pressures of Christian leadership without them. They are a precious gift from God. Please don't miss out on the benefits of mentoring because you never get around to asking!

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