



Clutterbuck
Associates

HOW TO FIND AND USE A MENTOR

Prof. David Clutterbuck

It's a truism that "everyone who makes it has a mentor". It's not entirely true – only 80 per cent of chief executives say they owe their success substantially to a mentor – but it's close enough. Whatever your chosen career, your chances of achieving your potential are greatly increased by having someone, to whom you can turn for wise and well-intentioned guidance. (Note the two attributes go together – there's a lot of well-intentioned but unwise advice about, too!)

Whether you work in a large organisation, a small concern, or are self-employed, you need:

- Sources of information, to find out what's important, where the opportunities lie and how you are doing
- Sources of influence: people who will exert their influence on your behalf
- A sounding board: someone to listen to you, challenge your thinking, widen your horizons and help you make up your mind when you have difficult choices

Building an extensive learning net is a key part of career management. A learning net is all those people, both inside the organisation and elsewhere, from whom you can usefully learn. That includes your colleagues (from whom you are likely to receive the most frequent learning), your line manager (who may either coach directly or encourage coaching by other members of the team) and your mentor (from whom you are likely to receive the most intensive learning), if you have one. The wider your learning net, the greater your career options and the opportunity to acquire a track record of useful experience and accomplishments.

Coaches help by focusing on performance and on your current job, giving you feedback to help you acquire skills – which may be technical or behavioural. To be effective, they usually need to observe you at work. Mentors focus on longer term building of potential, on helping you think through what you want, and in planning how to get there. Mentors are almost always outside the supervisory structure, so they have little opportunity to give you direct feedback. Rather, they help you take greater responsibility for managing your own development and your own career.

MAKING THE MOST OF A COACH

Effective coaches adapt their style according to how competent, confident and committed you are. The four styles they select from are:

- Tell – do this and I'll explain where you went wrong
- Show – watch me and try to do it the same way
- Suggest – do it your own way, but bear these things in mind...
- Stimulate – using questions to help you work out your own approach and what to concentrate on

Whatever style they use, the coach helps you improve by either giving feedback directly, or helping you generate your own feedback by observing yourself. Observing yourself isn't easy at first, but it is vitally important in getting the most out of coaching. Advanced drivers, for example, have to give a running commentary of everything they do, during their test. Most people find this one of the most useful and lasting parts of their instruction.

You can get more out of coaching, if you:

- Prepare for the meeting: what do you want to achieve? What thinking have you already done?
- Demonstrate the relevance of your learning need to the team goals
- Phrase your request for help in the right way. "How do I..?" or "I've got a problem with ..." almost always triggers advice and a tell or show style. "I've been thinking about this and would value your thoughts on my approach ..." is far more likely to open up the thoughtful dialogue of the stimulator style.

MAKING THE MOST OF A MENTOR

Effective mentors bring a wide experience to the relationship, but they use their experience to help you develop your own wisdom, rather than share their wisdom with you. They help you see issues from different perspectives, provide you with a role model of good behaviours and stimulate you to commit to stretching goals of your own choosing. They provide a safe haven, in which to discuss difficult issues, such as relationships with your boss or key colleagues, or how to choose between career options; at the same time, they may open up horizons, of which you are currently unaware.

To make best use of a mentor, it is important that you drive the relationship. You take the main responsibility for deciding what issues to discuss, what help you need and how often to meet. You also have to accept that the relationship carries obligations – not to be over demanding of the mentor's time, not to use it to undermine your boss and so on. It doesn't mean you always have to take your mentor's advice, nor that you should expect the mentor to intervene on your behalf (their role is to help you do things for yourself, not to act as a sponsor or godfather!)

FINDING A COACH OR MENTOR

Within the large organisation, there will often be formal schemes, which match learners to coaches and mentors. If your company doesn't have a scheme, or you are independent, you can:

- Look for a coach in someone, who is much more experienced in the specific tasks or competencies, where you want to develop your skills. Choose by preference someone who already has a good track record of developing others. Consider starting by asking to observe them first (demonstrator style), then ask if they'd like to coach you more formally
- Look for a mentor in someone, who has much wider experience, who is respected by others as a role model for achievement and/or behaviour. Avoid the traps of choosing a) someone who you get along with very, very well – they may be too similar to you to allow for much learning or b) a high flyer, on whose coat-tails you can hang. Look for someone, who will both challenge you and give you support and encouragement, according to your need at the time.

It is remarkable how positively people, in all walks of life and at all levels of importance, will respond to requests from people they hardly know (or don't know at all) to be their coach or mentor. As long as you are very clear about *why* you want a mentor and what your expectations of them are, getting a "yes" is relatively easy. Then it's up to you...

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Clutterbuck Associates

Grenville Court

Britwell Road

Burnham

Bucks

SL1 8DF

T: 01628 661 667

F: 01628 661 779

E: info@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk

www.clutterbuckassociates.com