

# So, You Need a Mentor?

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Several months ago, I received an email from a university student named Madison. She had been trying to connect with an experienced mediator to learn about the work but hadn't received any responses yet. We met up. Being around the same age, we found that we knew a lot of the same people and had similar struggles connecting in the mediation community. We set a simple goal: find mentors. I had never asked someone to mentor me formally before, but I knew immediately who I would reach out to. Madison was from out of town, so I connected her to a professor at the university and I contacted a friend of my mother's who had been mediating longer than I've been walking.

We have all heard how important mentorship is to develop a strong competency in a subject. Mentorship provides ongoing support, a critical asset for building a sustainable practice. It also opens up more opportunities for growth, constructive feedback, new connections, and even friendship.

But, where do we, the young mediators of the world, find these invaluable relationships? I was lucky to already have an existing relationship with my desired mentor. However, not everyone is connected, and it can be a struggle for mediators new to the practice or community. Madison had passively reached out to a number of reputable firms with little success. The experienced mediators we look up to are often busy with tasks so important that we feel too small to ask for any amount of time. However, for experienced mediators there can be a huge benefit in investing in a mentee.

For my fellow young mediators, here are five points to keep in mind when seeking a mentor:

## People are more willing to help than you think

We have a fear of asking, but mentors who mesh well with their mentee will enjoy the act of mentoring and will find it rewarding. So, ask! You may be surprised with a positive response. The worst outcome is that they say no, then you get to ask someone else. Ask, ask, ask away and even if the first person (or first several) don't work out, eventually someone will say 'yes!'.

## Everyone needs to eat

Literally ask someone out to lunch or suggest a monthly mentorship lunch. Even busy people need to eat, so giving someone you admire and respect a reason to eat out tends to be a winning approach. This is a hard approach for the more reserved, but I want to encourage you to be bold; starting any career will push you outside of your comfort zone. For me, this was my entry point to establish an on-going relationship with my mentor.

## Most people don't actually know what you want

One of the barriers mentors face is that they do not know what is expected of them. Would you take a job without knowing the job description? Be as clear as possible as to what you actually want in a mentorship. How much time do you need? How often would you like to meet? What would you like to do with that time? What information would you like to cover together, and why? Be very clear on what you're hoping for before you begin approaching perspective mentors.

## Make it easy

When requesting mentorship, be friendly, specific, and accommodate their schedule. Don't expect a mentor to dedicate large amounts of time to you. It can just be a coffee, a phone call, a lunch. Make it easy for them to say yes. Be helpful and find ways to be useful, offering assistance with note taking during a mediation, running errands, or making coffee are some examples. Remember to make it easy for yourself too, keep it simple. If you met someone at a conference or if you saw someone mediate in a way you want to emulate, you can start with just an email.

## Offer to mentor someone else

If there is a mediator who is greener than you are in your circle of influence, extend the offer! There is a lot to be learned through mentoring someone else including in a peer mentoring position. You can find someone close to your level of experience and mentor each other. Doing this gives you both the benefits of being both a mentor and a mentee and shows you are someone committed to the growth of the mediation industry, as you are supporting your fellow mediators. The more you mentor others the better you'll get at it and the easier it will become to approach other mediators for support.

Keep these five tips in mind and you'll have more success in building your mediation support network.

Mentorship also doesn't need to be a one-way street. Young or new mediators have a lot to offer mentors and the relationship can be reciprocal. Here are some of the benefits to mentoring a young mediator I have discovered from talking with my mentor and working with Madison:

### • Learning

In teaching others, we discover our own weaknesses and have an opportunity to strengthen our skills. The Roman philosopher Seneca said, "While we teach, we learn." By reflecting and teaching, we expand our knowledge and further develop our existing skills.

### • Enjoyment

A mentor once told me that watching a protégé succeed can be more fulfilling than succeeding oneself.

### • Professional Recognition

Through mentorship, professionals gain the respect of their colleagues and widen their circle of referral sources.

### • An Extra Pair of Hands

Mentees want to help! Flipchart writing and taking notes during meetings might feel like a chore to the experienced, but for a new mediator it is a valuable learning opportunity.

### • Fresh Perspective

Young and new mediators will have a different set of experiences, they might see something in a mediation that someone used to the process could miss.

If you are a more experienced mediator wanting to positively influence others, one of the best ways to do so is to support a mentee. Sometimes people see themselves in a younger mediator or they see a spark, an excitement, something to reignite the interest that originally brought them to mediation. Thinking back on the beginning of your career, there are probably a dozen people who made a difference in your life. This can be an opportunity to make a difference for someone else. It will bring a new level of joy into your practice. The best type of mentors are the ones who check in regularly and who show genuine interest. Mentorship is not a business relationship; it is a personal one.

We are all potential mentors and mentees. From your perspective, what do you look for in a mentor/mentee? [The Young Mediators Initiative](#) is currently reviewing their tips for mentors and mentees and we'd love to have your input in the comment section below.

I also invite readers to add any further suggestions they have to the comments below this blog!