

Mastering the Art of Being Mentored—4 Steps to Successful Growth

My friend and mentor, John Maxwell, has written and spoken about being mentored by the great coach John Wooden, among others.

Hearing this, a pastor asked me these questions: “How does one go about getting the greatest NCAA coach as a mentor? Did he (Maxwell) just ask for regular meetings, and what does mentorship look like?”

Good questions.

I will admit that getting John Wooden as a coach is an extraordinary circumstance involving an extraordinary leader. But on the other hand, John Maxwell didn't start there. It was only after nearly 30 years of successful leadership that John was able to connect with Coach Wooden.

It was John's desire to grow and his great passion to add value to people's lives that made the difference. The fact that John is a tremendous student is also a very significant part of the story.

Over the years I've wondered which is more important—to have a great mentor or to be a great student? The easy answer is both. But more and more, I think the secret is in being a great student.

You can have the most brilliant mentor in the world, even a famous one, but if you aren't ready to pay the price, dig in, learn and change, it won't matter.

There are many stories of men and women who received an hour or so of someone's time but arrived ill-prepared. They had no

written questions. They talked more than they listened and expressed very little gratitude. It was almost as if they had some time to kill and thought it might be fun. So when someone does say yes, show up prepared.

And, if you want a meaningful mentoring relationship, let me offer more good advice.

1. Be good at something.

This might sound strange, but you need to be good at something before you ask someone to help you be great at something.

You can be good at anything! What it is doesn't matter. You may want to be a great leader, and your only claim to fame is that you are good at golf or giving a talk. Maybe you are brilliant at math or are a techy genius type.

Here's the point, if you are good at something, you have shown the passion and discipline to create the needed potential to become great at what you really want.

2. Seek someone just a little ahead of you.

A common mistake is to think: "If I'm going for a mentor, I'm going right to the top and get the best." I appreciate that you think big, but you are likely making a mistake.

For example, if a pastor who serves in a church of 500 seeks a mentor who pastors a church of 7,000, the two of them live in two different worlds, and they barely speak the same language.

Yes, the leadership principles are the same. But you are much better off being mentored by someone who understands where you are, and their current reality is closer to yours.

If you lead a church of 200, try to get a mentor who leads a church of 400 to 800. This is not a legalistic thing. Don't get hung up on the numbers; just go with the idea.

Make the ask. If the person says they are not able, don't get upset or discouraged. Ask God to lead you to another person.

3. Think intentionally organic.

Don't ask for lots of regularly scheduled meetings. You will likely lose a potential mentor that way. I recommend that you don't ask for monthly or even quarterly connects. Go for a more intentionally organic approach.

Here's what I mean. If you can hang with a couple of meetings a year, over phone or in person, plus a few short emails, you might be surprised by how quickly you get a yes. "Intentionally" refers to staying strategic and on purpose, and the "organic" simply means to catch the meetings when it works out naturally for both your schedules.

You don't need many meetings, not if you really want to change and grow.

If you connect with a mentor two or three times in a year, that is plenty. It will take you at least that much time between conversations to really put into practice what was given to you. Do the math: if you have two mentors, you can see that would be four to six connects a year. You can't absorb and practice more than that.

Note: When it's a boss/employee relationship, of course, you will meet much more often, but much of that will be about doing ministry. In fact, if you are "mentoring" weekly, you are probably doing something closer to a counseling relationship than coaching or mentoring.

Also, if an employee is struggling with competence, you should meet more often, but that would be more skill coaching than mentoring.

Coaching and mentoring have overlapping characteristics, but I define the primary difference as:

- Coaching deals with day-to-day skills and practices.
- Mentoring deals with lifelong wisdom and principles.

4. Work harder than your mentor.

Invest your time and your mentor's time well. Show up with well-thought and relevant questions. Take notes. Work hard to practice what was discussed, and the next time you talk, tell him or her what you have done.

A good mentor will always have some questions, a resource or two and good advice, but the mentoring is more your job than his/hers.

You set the agenda and come with it in writing. If your mentor asks you to do something, make the necessary adjustments, but do it.

This does not prevent a respectful disagreement within honest conversations, but overall, you either want their advice, or you don't. If you don't, that's OK. But if that becomes a pattern, perhaps you should say thanks and bring closure to the mentoring relationship.

I've been blessed with five mentors over the course of my life, and I'm grateful! I'm sure that's part of the reason I'm eager to pass on as much as I can. I trust that you will also pass on what is given to you. {eo}

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