

The Importance of and How to Find a Mentor

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Whenever I am asked what is the missing link between a promising businessperson and a successful one, mentoring comes to mind. Giving people advice on how they can best achieve their goals is something that is often overlooked. – Richard Branson

On a daily basis, I receive emails from people looking for jobs who are unemployed. Many of these people have had numerous jobs in their career and are having a difficult time getting a new job.

If you are unemployed or need a new job, there are many strategies you can use to get a new position. However, nothing is more important or can be more drastically effective than having a strong mentor on your side. Anything I could tell you about interviewing, cover letters, resumes, or tracking down jobs would pale in comparison to what a good mentor can do for you. Having a good mentor is hugely important.

Not having a mentor can be devastating. If you do not have a mentor, much of what happens to you will happen by chance and, when things get rough, there will be no one to protect you.

Everyone needs a mentor. The most powerful people out there all have mentors. Even Donald Trump had a mentor (his father) who helped him get started.

- I have a friend who is a stockbroker and was lucky enough to get a mentor early in his career. This mentor introduced the stockbroker to the most powerful and wealthiest people in Los Angeles, and now the stockbroker is also very wealthy and successful. He's in his mid-30s.
- I've watched countless lawyers lose their jobs (thousands) throughout my career. At the same time, I've seen numerous attorneys with zero business move from firm to firm because they were protected by a mentor.

If you are able to gain the favor of important people, they will guide and help you in your career. They will help you [find jobs](#), they will make sure you are protected in the jobs you do get, and they will help you be favored for promotions.

- Without a mentor, you may be quite helpless, and a lot of bad things can happen to people without mentors.
- If you do not have a mentor, you are sort of “playing it by ear” and may not necessarily know what you are doing.

This is not good. When you see people who are unemployed and cannot get jobs, it is often because they did not get a mentor or advocate to help them along the way. They may have gone through their careers acting self-important, indignant and arrogant, as if they did not need others help. This is never a good thing, and these people are the ones who have the most trouble in the long run.

The most successful people cultivate the favor and advice of powerful and important people in their organizations and profession.

One of the most powerful judges I know in Los Angeles lost her [job at a firm](#) I was working for because of a variety of factors beyond her control. She had been playing her cards right throughout her career, had a powerful mentor and was able to get appointed to be a judge before she was forced to leave the law firm.

I know of a powerful acting coach in Los Angeles who has the ability to get people good agents, introduce actors to casting directors and help them land roles. He has people literally fawning all over him and kissing his ass 24-hours a day because they are trying to gain his favor and get him to mentor them. It is fun to watch. They go pick up his dry cleaning and do his errands for him in the hopes he will favor them.

A couple of times a year, I am invited to various events put on by banks, venture capitalists and private equity firms around the country. I have even given various speeches at these events before. I've never understood these events. Basically, investors seek out businesses which are already successful (or look like they will be) and invest as little as they can for as much return as they can get. Investors are looking to make huge returns. If they could make a loan at 10,000%, they would!

What has always amazed me about these events is that the people attending them seem so eager to get investors—regardless of the terms. In fact, these events are competitive in nature because so many people are seeking the attention of people with money to invest. It is quite crazy really. Even people with very successful businesses are sycophants desperate for investor dollars.

At the same time, the investors are always sort of playing hard to get, acting self-important and a little standoffish to the people seeking money. They are often quite arrogant, talk down to the entrepreneurs and have an attitude as if they are “above” these businesses and do not want too much face-to-face interaction with the people operating the businesses.

Most very successful businesses ([Facebook](#), [Apple](#), [Google](#) and [Amazon](#)) all took lots and lots of investments from venture capitalists and others. In addition, I would say that most of these businesses did not really need the investment and could have operated and grown (but not as quickly) without the investments.

The terms that entrepreneurs and others are generally offered by investors do not make a lot of sense—on the surface. An entrepreneur might have a fast-growing business and, in exchange for a small amount of money relative to what they are “selling,” they will give up control and a portion of the business to people who can fire them, control how much money they take out of the business and basically run their lives.

As a business person, I never understood it: ***Why would someone give away their business to a stranger for pennies on the dollar?***

Most investors in businesses are trying to make an incredible return—50x or more of their investment back in a few years.

Why on earth would someone take—much less beg—for this kind of investment with these terms? The reason places like [Goldman Sachs](#) make so much money is because they invest very little and get huge returns.

After years of attending these events, I finally fully understood why: ***Most entrepreneurs are seeking a mentor.***

It is as simple as that. People ultimately seek investors because they want mentors. If the entrepreneur takes the investment, they will suddenly have a mentor on their side helping and guiding them along the way.

The investor will:

- Call and check in quite often
- Make introductions to various people
- Recommend accounting firms, advertising firms and others
- Give advice about taking future investments, going public and the overall direction of the business.

Ultimately, the investor gives the entrepreneur guidance that the entrepreneur could not get otherwise. The idea is that the entrepreneur will, therefore, be that much more successful due to the involvement of the investor.

There is also a bit of a class component to all of this as well. The bankers also generally conduct themselves very well. They dress very well, are generally extremely well-educated, know the most important people and travel in the best circles. They thus position themselves as having something the entrepreneur may not and offer entrance into a different and better world.

The role of the investor is to be a mentor and offer the prospect of access to a different world. They are paid very well for this in most cases.

I now see these private equity events for what they are: Hungry people looking for mentors and help. They are almost like “adoption day” in an orphanage where children do everything they can to get a family to take them under their wing.

I have seen countless lives and careers changed when someone took another person's side and became their advocate:

- **In the entertainment business, I have seen numerous people get top agents and [acting jobs](#) because someone powerful was on their side.** In fact, having a mentor is almost mandatory for someone to be successful in the entertainment business.
- **I've seen numerous people get [jobs in the legal field](#), that they certainly would not have gotten otherwise, had it not been for someone advocating for them.** I know of numerous attorneys making more than \$1,000,000 a year who would have likely left the legal profession without having an advocate behind them. They lost their jobs, or had other serious issues and someone stepped in and helped them recover.

When I was in college, a girl I know applied to [Stanford Law School](#) (via mail) on a Monday and received an acceptance letter from Stanford Law School on Friday. While the girl was very smart and had great qualifications, I am pretty sure that she was so quickly accepted by the school because her mentor was a very well-known professor at the [University of Chicago Law School](#). She had taken classes with this person, worked very hard for him and been dedicated to him.

I've personally hired numerous people because their mentors contacted me and asked me to help them.

If a mentor is so important, how does one go about getting one?

First, the key is to find the right person to follow. The person you follow generally needs to be very respected and established.

While I am not an expert in this, I have generally found that the best person to get as your mentor is often a person that not everyone is pursuing. For example, when I was in college, everyone wanted to get a mentor who had won a Nobel prize in economics or something similar. With hoards of people trying to kiss these peoples' asses, it seemed to be a really bad idea.

The mentor you choose should be powerful, but not the same person everyone else is trying to get as their mentor. This means that you will likely be able to stand out. Here is how I chose my mentor in college:

I was taking a class with a professor whose father was a famous Dean at Yale College. I was also very interested in the subject matter this professor was teaching. I knew that he was likely to be extremely well connected in the academic community and could help me with graduate schools and beyond. By choosing him as a mentor, I almost won a Rhodes Scholarship, and he made sure I got into my first choice of law school. Had I not chosen him, the result would have been different.

The reason this person was a good choice was because no one else was really vying for his attention. Because few people were following this person, I was able to get him interested in my cause.

Secondly, you need to connect with the person you are following. Just because you want someone to be your mentor does not mean they will reciprocate this. You need to make some sort of connection with this person.

My mentor in college was an anthropology professor who was teaching a bunch of classes about how Africans adapted in the United States and the Caribbean. Most of the students taking these classes were “hippies” who enjoyed the classes but were not likely to spend their careers doing much to help the people we were learning about. One day my mentor said something that I thought was quite interesting:

“You guys are all really smart; however, I really hope you do something one day to help the people we are learning about.”

I thought this was very moving. That summer I decided that I would run my asphalt business out of Detroit and hire all of my workers from a drug halfway house. I could then provide them with recommendations for full-time jobs at the end of the summer. I hired around 30 people that summer, and it worked out quite well.

The professor was ecstatic and loved that I had followed his advice, and he took me under his wing. In all honesty, he may have even given me a better grade in his class the next fall than I deserved, and he certainly helped me a great deal.

Someone is not going to just be your mentor because you ask. You need to earn it, and they need to see that you share the same values. It is natural for people to want to help others they believe stand for the same things they stand for.

Third, you need to show the person that is your mentor that you will give them your unwavering loyalty.

- This means that you will not disagree with them on subjects they are sensitive about.
- It means you will defend them when they are not around.
- It means you will work as hard as you possibly can on the issues and ideas that are important to them.

- It means you will go out of your way to make them feel special (errands, carrying papers and whatever needs to be done).

You need to show the person you want to be your mentor as much respect as you possibly can.

People like being mentors. It makes them feel important. It makes them feel like they have something to give back. It makes them feel wise. When you seek someone out and make them your mentor (if they will accept that role), you enter into a position with them where they theoretically can help you for the rest of your life. Mentors feel proud of this role and want to help people grow.

My mother started her career working as a secretary for a state senator. He got her an excellent and highly-paid job with the government, and she remained there for most of her career. Throughout my childhood, he continued to check in on her and advise her on her career.

I want to bring up a few points that are quite relevant to finding a mentor.

First, in order to find a mentor, it is often going to be necessary that you work with people who are similar to you. There are cultural and other issues that can affect whether someone ultimately will take you under their wing. Your race, sex, sexual orientation, class background and more will all impact the sort of mentor you attract. In most cases (not all), someone who is going to be your mentor is more likely than not to have a background quite similar to your own.

Second, I have a special note for women. If at all possible, choose a mentor of your own sex. In the vast majority of cases where a younger woman chooses an older man as a mentor, the boundaries of this relationship often result in a sexual relationship. I do not know why—but I have seen this more than I can count. I've seen it with 19-year old college students and 50-year old professors. I've seen it more times than I can count in law firms and companies and elsewhere. Once the sex starts, the relationship changes. Unless the woman truly understands the man, and there are clear boundaries, the best mentor for a woman is likely to also be a woman.

Because of the importance of a mentor, I would advise you to take jobs and work in conditions where you are most likely to find a mentor. This is not to say a black woman is not going to get a white woman to be her mentor, or a gay man is not going to get a straight man to be his mentor, but it is less likely to be so. I am just the messenger here and telling you what I have seen. This is how it generally works. In a law firm, for example, if a partner likes to smoke a lot of pot, the odds are the person he mentors may share the same method of dealing with stress and be of a similar background. This is how it works.

You should seek out and choose environments where you are likely to find a mentor over those where you are not. You need a mentor. The problem with many people is that they think they can do everything on their own. While many people can make it on their own, it is much more difficult without the benefit of a mentor.

Read More About Your Career With a Given Employer May Depend on Having a Good Mentor There:

- [Mentors, Attachment Disorders and Your Career](#)