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Minding Her Business

How to Find Strong Mentors and Why You Should Never Ignore Anti-Mentors



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The M word that divides women executives is not Motherhood, it's Mentor.

Some of us believe fervently in the mentors we've had, and some believe just as passionately that the search for mentors is a giant waste of time.

To me, the search for the perfect mentor is like the search for a soul mate. As far as I'm concerned, if you are looking to wed someone with whom you have eternal chemistry, share ALL important values, and whose personal habits will remain endearing throughout the decades, you may be searching a long time and missing out on some great partners along the way.

Have a story about finding a mentor, or learning from an anti-mentor that you'd like to share? E-mail us at herbusiness@foxnews.com, and we'll share what some of you have to say next week.

One reason that formal mentoring programs don't work well – at least according to the C-level women I interviewed for my book, "Naked in the Boardroom: A CEO Bares Her Secrets So You Can Transform Your Career" – is that they are an arranged-marriage approach to this partnering. The person in search of a mentor needs to take more responsibility for the choice.

Here are a few tips on how to identify a good mentor match:

* **"Date" a lot, rather than "marry"**. I began my career at Penthouse magazine, an unlikely place for me and one where I had many unlikely mentors. One was a former dancer (probably a stripper) who overcame an almost pathological shyness to run advertising sales. This showed me that you can succeed despite any personality trait. Another mentor was the CFO who protected every dollar of the company's money as if it were his own. Penthouse's head of public relations had exquisite personal taste and finely tuned ethics. Impeccable in Sonia Rykiel, she devotedly represented a tasteless magazine. I learned I could be dedicated to a product that didn't appeal to me personally.

* **Choose your teachers based on talent and personal connection, not upon hierarchy or shared gender.** Often in a corporation the people at your level can't or won't offer assistance, and you may have little to learn from them anyway. The person who taught me the most about management was a large man with a heavy Alabama accent; I am size 4 from Long Island NY. When I met him (knowing his business successes) and found him willing to chat about business with me, I grabbed the opportunity.

* **Temporarily out-of-favor and very senior people may have more time for you.** Since you are looking for learning, not self-promotion, don't stand on ceremony. Most careers are not steady marches to the top. Even the most successful executives find themselves in backwaters or holding patterns. At that point, they will welcome the ambitious person seeking their counsel.

* **Once a mentor, not always a mentor.** Someone who could be an incredible teacher at one point in your career, may carry too much weight at another point. You as a student may have surpassed your teacher.

But, the most valuable lessons I have learned came from observing unproductive behavior in the office – and vowing to do things differently when I got a chance. Yes, indeed, you can learn so much from anti-mentors, whose bad behavior you are determined never to emulate.

My friend Liz (Perle, author of "Money: A Memoir") calls them tor-mentors. De-mentors would work, too, if J.K. Rowling doesn't own that term.

I had two bosses in particular that I thank for these types of lessons. One of them taught me the evils of lack of direct feedback; form over function; and politics over performance. He was the consummate corporate politician. I never knew where I stood with him, so I had to resort to interpreting his assistant's treatment in order to read those tea leaves. When I realized that where I stood had less to do with my performance, and everything to do with how it reflected on him, I resolved that people would always know where they stood with me.

The other bad boy was much smarter and less political than Anti-mentor One, but he was so impressed with his own brilliance that he couldn't make room for other people's ideas. Ego-driven decisions are generally the wrong ones. I can get as stuck on my own bright idea as anyone – ask the people at TeeBeeDee – but people with whom I work have no problem telling me when the idea is less than brilliant. Anti-mentor Two taught me that people closer to the situation are better equipped to solve the problem, and their bosses' egos shouldn't get in the way.

While looking for a mentor is a little easier than looking for love, it is another situation where you can be "looking for love in all the wrong places" and actually learn something in the process. So whether you're observing an anti-mentor or modeling a mentor, engage people that can teach you something. And don't forget to do the same for others along the way.

Entrepreneur and author Robin Wolaner founded Parenting magazine in 1985. After Time Inc. purchased Parenting, Wolaner joined Time Publishing Ventures as vice president for development. She became president and CEO of Sunset Publishing Corporation, a Time Inc. property, in 1992. Wolaner was the founding non-executive chairman of

the company now known as PlanetOut Inc. She then joined CNET Networks where she oversaw the launch of CNET's groundbreaking user reviews of consumer electronics and served on the integration team for the acquisition of CNET's largest rival, ZDNet. In 2007, Wolaner founded TeeBeeDee, an online experience network where she currently serves as CEO.

"Minding Her Business" is a column that covers issues affecting women in business and in the workplace. Female professionals (and male, too, if they wish) can use this resource to network, ask questions, receive and offer advice, share personal experiences ... and you don't ever have to leave your office. Just e-mail herbusiness@foxnews.com. E-mails are subject to editing for length and content.

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