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Attracting Great Mentors

Seven Strategies to Cultivate

By Judy Vogel and Susan Finkelstein

Recently, we discovered that both our lives have been deeply touched by many informal mentors—people who came into our lives informally, not as part of a formal mentoring program, and who provided generous guidance and support during our early years and through our careers. With growing excitement, we explored how we had come to be so fortunate and wondered whether we had developed, perhaps unknowingly, some strategies that drew these people to us.

This curiosity inspired the project and findings that we present in this article. We describe the attributes, beliefs, and behaviors—what we call the Seven Strategies—that draw accomplished others into the special relationship that is called mentorship. We also explore how this relationship has benefited individuals and their organizations. While a lot has been written about how to be a mentor for others and how to design organizational mentoring systems, we have seen little published on the approaches that some individuals themselves draw on to organically and successfully attract a mentor to invest in them. So we designed an interview-based project, as reported here, to explore this deeper level, both psychological and behavioral, of the strategies for cultivating a mentoring relationship. This project represents an exploration of a phenomenon that helps us understand our own experience and that has potential value for people as they move through their careers.

We offer a model of Seven Strategies based on these findings that we suggest others may consider and perhaps cultivate in their lives. We selected the word *strategy* to convey our observation that interviewees brought awareness and intention to their actions and were purposeful in their approaches to potential mentors based on their beliefs of what would attract support to themselves.

We also share recommendations for how HR and OD professionals can integrate the learning drawn from this exploratory project to enrich their thinking and support their efforts to create powerful leadership development and talent management initiatives and resources within their organizations.

The Project

To begin, we asked many clients, colleagues, family members, and friends if their lives had been enriched at some point by informal mentors—accomplished others who provided career or life guidance and encouragement that made a real difference to them. A few reported that they could not recall such experiences and wondered why not. Others enthusiastically cited wonderful people who had mentored them at various stages of their lives and careers. We invited these individuals to tell us their stories, and we thank them for their tremendous generosity.

In total we interviewed 24 people, who brought rich diversity of age, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, career stage, and occupation. They included successful nonprofit and for-profit executives, lawyers, OD consultants, HR professionals, physicians, academics, diversity

specialists, financial leaders, and education consultants. Based on their reflections, we have developed this article and the model that conveys their stories. Although we provide anonymity to our interviewees, we intersperse samples of their stories and some of their words to illustrate and enrich our model.

Findings

Overarching the Seven Strategies is a theme of self-awareness—that is, a capacity to have insight into one's internal reactions and chose one's external behavior, which then express the strategies. Many of our interviewees reported a pattern of both self reflection and self talk. One said that from his youth, he was self aware—knew what he needed, and "went after it." Another related her pattern of trusting her "own foundation," making it possible to reach out comfortably to others in, what she described as, an "uncomplicated humility." Yet another woman reported an awareness of having gotten "beyond my own reservation of feeling pushy" so she could extend herself. Another interviewee offered her awareness that she needed to prepare herself for "pushing against old messages of needing to be modest and humble and not ask for anything."

One described the challenge of knowing she was different from others in her work place. "Being myself was tough when I knew I was different as a woman, as a woman of color, and lacking an upper class background. So I had to meld without quashing who I am." She described knowing from the beginning of her career how valuable it was to have leaders accept her and support her, especially senior men of color, who provided informal mentoring at key times. It was men, she recalled, who had been in the organizational positions back then to help.

Another individual articulated the awareness expressed by many of our interviewees: "I am confident in my areas of strength and not very defensive regarding my areas of need—I don't have much ego need. In fact, I feel loved when people help me, which means a lot to me."

Table 1: Seven Strategies for Attracting a Great Mentor

1. Deepen Your Capacity for Discernment
2. Develop Your Radar for a Mentor
3. Be Courageous and Proactive
4. Cultivate Social Skills
5. Work Hard and Pursue Excellence
6. Demonstrate a Passion for Learning
7. Foster Collegial Relationships

"Being myself was tough when I knew I was different as a woman, as a woman of color, and lacking an upper class background. So I had to meld without quashing who I am." She described knowing from the beginning of her career how valuable it was to have leaders accept her and support her, especially senior men of color, who provided informal mentoring at key times. It was men, she recalled, who had been in the organizational positions back then to help.

This self-awareness of non-defensive receptivity to others' help, coupled with purposeful actions, underlies the Seven Strategies of our model. Our findings fall into seven interconnecting strategies that supported the success of these brave individuals who pursued the assistance of seasoned people and, in many cases, transformed their own lives *(Table 1)*.

1. Deepen Your Capacity for Discernment:

» Be drawn to genuine wisdom.
» Be curious about other's experiences and views.

The mentors we heard about came from many walks of life. Some were prominent in their fields; others were not. However, the recurring theme was that our interviewees recognized them as people who possessed knowledge, wisdom, and experience that our subjects thought had importance for their own futures.

One woman stated simply that the person she saw as a potential source of help was someone from whom she "could learn." Many conveyed this idea in a variety of words. As she was entering a new field, one interviewee said that she was on the lookout for someone with "the nose for the work."

It was his boss's successful "entrepreneurial style" that attracted one man to inquire how she went about setting up her practice. Hoping to eventually launch his own practice, he saw her achievement as providing valuable guidance. Another described reaching out to two men who were senior to him and who, he observed, "knew their way around." Both interviewees discerned the genuine career wisdom of these potential mentors.

Another sought advice about undertaking a graduate degree; and in fact, after receiving excellent guidance, chose to attend the same university that his trusted mentor had attended. In this way, he moved successfully into a new career. Another said she had been drawn to colleagues who "said wise things about their work, and I listened." And the quality of this listening generated invaluable support and coaching in their shared field of work. She described another informal mentor who "graciously shared gems of wisdom" based on many years of work. She enjoyed and benefited from exploring her mentor's experience.

Another man stated that he was "drawn to people who do something well" based on his own "ability to make assessments of others, of who's better than whom" in his field of interest. One woman discerned her new supervisor to be an "iconic boss," who had the ability to

provide the staff with "deep coaching and tough love;" she knew she wanted to be like this boss professionally and she actively sought a relationship with him.

In almost every case, a key dimension seems to be both the clear-eyed discernment of people who embody and express accumulated depth of experience and wisdom that might contribute significantly to their lives, and also the drive to learn more in order to be successful. One directly stated this: "I identified people who had something that I wanted." He acted on this discernment.

2. Develop Your Radar for a Mentor:

» Scan each "room" you enter for the most interesting people present.
» Connect to people who are different from you in important ways that will stretch your awareness, skills, and network.

A recurring pattern in this strategy is being proactive and bold from the beginning—and everywhere; these people did not wait for things to come their way, but rather took initiative on behalf of their goals. Individuals described watching for people who potentially had richness to share. While at first reading, their approaches may sound rather calculating, in fact the stories we heard described genuine curiosity and spontaneous radar for who would be most interesting to meet, plus the willingness to initiate contact, despite the risk of being rebuffed.

One person reported a practice of looking for people "who have something I want, people I want to know—and then I cut them out of the herd!" He said that he believes that part of his success in getting their valuable attention was his tendency to be "optimistically courageous" about the possibility of a supportive relationship, believing that he created a "self fulfilling prophecy" that supported his goal.

Another man reflected on his "ability to make assessments of others, of who's better than whom" and then acting with "confidence to seek what I want to get." A woman conveyed that she was "willing to be outside my comfort zone" and extend herself. She told of approaching people whom she greatly respected by consciously not putting them on a pedestal but also conveying openly her regard for them. This combination of self confidence and courage to initiate appears to run through many of the stories we heard.

Yet another reported that she sought out "people with vision and strategic sense. I look for people who understand the system, who treat others well, who recognize value around them, give credit to others, challenge in constructive ways and provide opportunities to grow." These behaviors and attitudes were detected by her active radar and guided her taking initiative. This strategy of developing the radar describes the actions of many of our interviewees.

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3. Be Courageous and Proactive:

» Want something! Be clear what it is.
» Take risks to reach out to successful people at every stage of your life. Share yourself deeply—be open about your dreams, goals, concerns, and your real self.
» Request help and ask lots of questions, including ones that may seem naïve.

In one way or another, all our interviewees believe that one motivation for attracting a mentor was their own desire to "have what she's having," to cite the popular film, *When Harry Met Sally.* They reported clear realization that they had a boss or a colleague, who might have valuable information from their own successful lives; and the interviewees actively took steps to connect with their targets.

One man said that while observing his new boss perform her role as a psychotherapist, something "clicked in me. I knew I wanted to do what she did, so I initiated a conversation and asked if she thought I could be successful in that role." He reported that her positive response and her generous advice and encouragement changed his life. He fostered a relationship in which he repeatedly "reached out to her" and asked many questions and she helped him greatly.

One person reported feeling some hero-worship of a new professional contact, but pushed herself nevertheless to connect; and, while asking questions, she explicitly conveyed genuine and unabashed excitement about being in conversation with this "star." Her openness about this dynamic, which is often a taboo subject, seemed to work for them.

In a similar vein, another interviewee applied to a staff recruitment opportunity in a prominent organization of consultants. Knowing the risk of rejection but wanting the assignment badly, she managed her sense of vulnerability and submitted her application. In the end, she was not accepted, but she did receive what she considered to be valuable career development advice from the senior colleague. She acted upon it with gratitude and benefit.

Many of their stories focused on asking questions and really listening to the responses; however, they also emphasized the importance of acting on the

information, which demonstrated, as well as stated, how valuable it was to them. They believed that taking action was a visible show of commitment to the mentor and that it furthered the relationship.

One reported that his mentor "got interested in my quest for a new profession and referred me to another prominent member of the profession." Striking to us was his use of the term "quest," suggestive of the power of his willingness to reveal, through language, the intensity of his desire, which in turn apparently inspired the mentor. Further, he described his reaching out to his mentor as "shameless," and he was "direct and clear" about his desire for help in searching for a new profession. Such willingness to be self disclosing and vulnerable seems, from our interviewing, to be a recurring presentation of self that attracts mentors to get involved and share their valuable networks.

Finally, we heard about the importance of asking questions, not just about the work itself, but also about the mentor's personal experience. One person reported that such conversations worked best when they were part of casual conversation, not a formal meeting. In that informal exchange, both could talk comfortably and deeply and thus build the relationship.

4. Cultivate Social Skills:

» Foster connection, rapport, and trust.
» Manage self confidence and respectful deference to the mentor. Recognize limits and don't take advantage of the mentor's time or other resources.
» Pay attention to personality style—yours and the mentor's.
» Stay in touch and convey appreciation for the mentor's generosity.

Clearly, a complex set of inter-personal social skills under-gird these rich relationships. Every person described a sophisticated ability to establish rapport and engage others, to explore deeply, to build and sustain trust, and to manage a relationship of mutuality. One man said that he believed that his success attracting mentors is attributable to his being genuinely "available for a relationship." He went on to disclose with a small smile that he persisted in these relationships with the confidence that comes from being "ignorant of social conventions" and, therefore, unconstrained in his effort.

Others emphasized the importance of establishing rapport and trust. One woman described it as the result of her being "transparent" regarding her motives and actions. In a similar vein, another reported her effort to convey good intentions to others, including her willingness to help others be successful; these actions were cited later by her mentor, she reported, as attracting his attention and inspiring his interest to help her.

Several stories mentioned a mysterious and elusive quality of the rapport. One man described an early mentoring relationship with a high school counselor who seemed to have a "6th sense" about him, especially when he was "on the verge of getting into trouble." She showed up just in time to remind him "that he knew better." Although the source of her knowing was a mystery to him, her commitment to him was unmistakable and greatly valued. With emotion, he reported opening himself to her vision of him, to his life-long benefit. His choice to be open to her expressed his remarkable ability to relate to another person, even as a teenager.

Several other people struggled to find words to describe relationships that grew out of the mentor's seeing "something in me that I didn't yet know about." The rapport that emerged had an almost magical quality. "An insufficiency of language exists to convey the kind of rapport we had," one person reported. She mused that the relationship with her mentor possessed "some ineffable dimension, even a spiritual connection."

Such a connection was sometimes highly freeing. One reported that with his mentor he was able to explore his social group identity in a way that was unprecedented in his life and very liberating. This relationship, grounded in trust, enabled him to begin to see himself in professional roles that had not before seemed remotely possible. And based on this new perspective, he was able to take valuable steps to build his career.

A second and key dimension of the social skills strategy relates to managing both confidence and deference. Having humility to recognize that someone is superior to oneself and to know one's limits, and to be open about them, was reported by several as an attitude that seemed to help foster successful mentoring relationships.

One person reported that "signaling deference in concrete ways and not competing or trying to scoop" the mentor was an effective approach to building and maintaining the trusting relationship. A man described being aware of conveying respect both verbally and non-verbally; he avoided engaging in competitive exchanges or sparring, but rather eagerly participated in challenging discussions—what he named as a complex and nuanced "dance."

Similarly, this difficult balancing act was cited as part of another interviewee's ability to foster strong mentoring relations with several bosses based on balancing deference with boldness. She challenged them regarding new ways of doing things in the organization and gave them ideas even when not asked; at the same time, she conveyed, sometimes explicitly, that "you're the boss; I'll do what you tell me."

Reflecting a different style, one described her approach as: "You must be assertive and purposeful and take responsibility. Furthermore, as with any relationship, it required a certain comfort level, an ease of communication, mutual respect and appreciation." She saw herself as an active agent on her own behalf. At the same time, she reported being respectful of the mentor's time and not taking advantage.

People reported their awareness of their own personality styles and their effort to pay attention to the styles of their mentors. We heard from one interviewee about not being put off by the curmudgeonly style and reputation of one senior person. Another described a senior person in her organization as having a scary reputation for being "inscrutable and brilliant;" however, she pursued the relationship. In time, as these relationships flourished for our interviewees, these initially off-putting

leaders became highly effective and valued mentors.

In a somewhat lighter vein, several spoke of their own personality styles helping to attract the mentor. One commented that her "happy attitude" attracted support. People like to help others who bring a positive spirit to the situation, she believed. Another person commented that he used his sense of humor to make the relationship comfortable. Yet another reported having the capacity to be serious when needed and also to have fun over a beer when the time was right.

I was one who "took the work seriously, but wasn't serious" is how one person described her own style and personality. She went on to say that she doesn't upset people—"even when I am being intrepid." She believes that this style attracted the attention and support of several mentors. She added that she "figures out how to have people feel good" about what was happening, and she takes on "the challenge to create all winners—no one is a loser," she said. Her mentors observed this skillful interpersonal pattern and reinforced her approach.

Many people described their strategy of maintaining the relationship by taking initiative to stay in touch and to make known their appreciation. "I made sure that I stayed on his radar screen," one man disclosed. "Working with his assistant, I got on his calendar and had regular lunch meetings with him." One woman said she followed up regularly on conversations with her mentors to keep the relationship active. Another said he made sure to have lots of communication over time, and he described himself as a "bridge-builder and never a bridge-burner."

Finally, many reported that they believe it is very important to make known their appreciation. One said, "I remind them that they matter to me." Another observed that she "likes receiving recognition and acknowledgement and also likes to give it." Though she commented that recognition is less important now as her career has progressed, she believes that she owes acknowledgement to people who give of themselves to her, as did her mentors. The impact of this strategy is to lay the foundation that enables mentor relationships to continue for years.

People reported that they used a wide range of sophisticated and subtle social skills to lay a strong foundational relationship and build ongoing rapport with the people whom they attracted to be their mentors.

5. Work Hard and Pursue Excellence:

» Become known for productivity.
» Exercise your own quality control.

Establishing a reputation for productivity and excellence was reported by virtually every person we interviewed. They described their conscious and continuous efforts to contribute above and beyond expectations. One disclosed, "I went beyond the job requirements to make sure that the right things happened. I did not wait to be asked; I took tasks on, even beyond my organizational level, and was self-sufficient." Another described her behavior this way: "I showed ambition and commitment to productivity." Another reflected, "I showed initiative and that I wasn't afraid of hard work." A man recalled, "I had to demonstrate my competence before he'd mentor me. In a time-sensitive emergency, I came through." The bottom line for these individuals is expressed by one who said, "I seized all opportunities."

We inquired about the motives that underlay this energetic behavior and heard some fascinating disclosures. One said, "I didn't worry about rewards." Another revealed, "Unselfish helping was my strategy, and I was sincere in the desire to be of help." Finally, one stated clearly that "I was always trying to make a difference."

As we continued to probe these statements, we heard about their personal values. One described herself as having "high personal standards of excellence." Another stated in a rather matter-of-fact way, "I brought my national culture of hard work and a belief that hard work comes before play."

Clearly, people who get adopted by mentors consistently deliver high quality work and get noticed for this.

6. Demonstrate a Passion for Learning:

» Take risks.
» Be genuinely curious, not looking for attention.

A strategy of demonstrating a Passion for Learning was reported by virtually every person we interviewed. In different words, they all said what one reported as "I was always looking for people from whom I could learn and I conveyed that I really wanted to learn and I wanted to help." They described taking initiative to learn and explicitly expressing this passion for learning to the mentor.

Further, in several ways they reported demonstrating a "willingness to be in the potentially uncomfortable position of submitting myself to being a learner." From people who were often already quite accomplished, this receptivity impressed us. One high level leader stated, "I trusted the mentor and felt ok about *being in the not knowing*. It felt ok to be candid about what I did and didn't know."

On the other hand, we heard how difficult it was sometimes to return to the vulnerable state of being a learner again. One person described the dilemma this way; "I had to fight to get into the field, so it was hard to open myself as a learner again." However, this is exactly what she did since she sensed it would be beneficial even if uncomfortable.

Several reflected on the ways that their own behavior reinforced the receptivity of the mentor to invest. One reported, "I demonstrated my ability to learn by asking questions that showed that I was tracking what was happening." Another described expressing her "pleasure in learning" and asserted that it "reinforced my mentor's willingness to help me."

Perhaps anticipating our skepticism, one stated, "my interest was genuine; I wasn't sucking up." One man reported that he became known as "a sponge," which his mentors "found attractive."

Further, several went beyond asking questions about the work. One man conveyed, "I asked for feedback regularly." This information about his performance proved invaluable for him. Another stated,

"I asked for skill building opportunities whether they were in the budget or not, and I often got to pursue them." In fact, said one woman, "At times, I was sassy and took big risks." And this paid off for her.

Their efforts yielded big benefits of expanded learning, skills, and networks.

Even beyond these, one stated, "I experienced an intergenerational transmission of wisdom."

7. Foster Collegial Relationships:

» Look for opportunities to build reciprocal relations.
» Give credit and offer support.

This last strategy identifies a complex and fascinating aspect of the mentoring process. While most mentoring relationships begin with two people in an asymmetrical alignment—with the mentor clearly having superior knowledge, experience, and status—in some pairings, a fascinating transformation happened over time. As one commented, "These relationships morph into genuine collegial friendships of equals." Frequently, these friendships endured for a long time, to the joy of the former mentee—and probably the mentor as well.

Here is how people described the gradual transition to a new relationship:

- "I no longer need him as a mentor. Over the years the relationship has evolved into a friendship."
- "My mentor initiated the gradual shift into a peer relationship."
- "We achieved over time a mutual reciprocity."
- "We kept in touch; and in time, my former mentor referred clients to me and we became colleagues."
- "The key is the ability to manage the relationship when the mentee grows beyond the mentor. If this happens, the relationship can continue all one's life."

We should underscore that, while often initiated by the mentee, the essential relationship of mentor and mentee is symbiotic and reciprocal. The mentor also gets many intangible benefits—respect, appreciation, deference, and the satisfaction of helping another person—often a younger person—develop and succeed. Mentors get to help the next generation, which is a deeply meaningful opportunity for many and allows them to pay back the support that they themselves received earlier in their careers.

The nature of the continuing relationship included the following observations:

- "The relationship is symbiotic, and it is a commitment."
- "My mentors became my friends based on trust."
- "Gradually, we created a mutual exchange. I offered to give to my mentor in areas of my own strength."
- "I keep in touch with her still."

Underlying these new relationships is a genuine belief in the possibility of partnership. One individual expressed it this way, "Becoming colleagues after our experience of her mentoring me is an expression of our value of collaborative work and a belief that we'll work better together than alone."

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Mentees Become Mentors

While this inquiry focused on the successful strategies for drawing a mentor to oneself, the people we interviewed reported that they are inclined to become mentors themselves. They felt that the gifts they received from an earlier generation could be returned to a later one.

Here are some of their comments:

- "I learned how to be an informal mentor from this experience and am inclined to offer it to others. I like to teach and I like to engage others."
- "Mentoring and being mentored fulfills the human relationship exchange: ask for help, use the help, appreciate the help, and pass it on to others."
- "When I was starting my career as a young woman, I was mentored by men; today, as a woman, I want to offer coaching to women."
- "I think successful people like to see the next generation in their own image. I suspect there was some self interest on their parts with regard to capacity building."

In Summary—Some Vital Signposts for Individuals

The Seven Strategies and the words of the people we interviewed provide a compilation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that supported their lives and careers. We conclude that these effective strategies are grounded in self initiated and self managed behaviors. Indeed, they are personal and contextual; however, we propose that these strategies can be cultivated and used by anyone who is motivated to develop self awareness and to learn skills and confidence in order to grow their careers.

So How Can Organizations Use This Information?

While the stories we heard and the themes they illustrate reflect the capability, energy and ambition of these 24 individuals, we

believe there are lessons here also for organization leaders, HR and OD professionals—anyone who is committed to and accountable for creating vibrant and innovative leadership development, talent management, talent retention, and succession planning. While organization practices cannot replace the initiative of individuals to actively shape their own career success, we believe that organizations can support these individuals' efforts with career-enhancing initiatives, as follows:

1. **Executive and Leader Coaching:** As coaches, OD Practitioners have the opportunity to explore their clients' assumptions and behaviors that support or undermine their success in getting adopted by informal mentors. As our interviews revealed, even successful people frequently wrestle with limiting beliefs, including modesty and a sense of unworthiness, which inhibit the quality of the proactive behavior needed to support success. Exploring the question, "What stops you from reaching out for help?" coupled with a discussion of the Seven Strategies can broaden the client's thinking and lay the groundwork to set development goals, shape action steps, and monitor progress.
2. **Diversity Initiatives:** As organizations increasingly define rigorous diversity visions and goals, and also provide supporting services such as action groups, training, and consulting services, informal mentoring can be a powerful approach for assisting members to overcome existing systemic limitations. The Seven Strategies can be integrated into an early phase of these initiatives so that members learn about success stories, especially of people from their own identity groups, and are able to take full benefit from the organization's efforts.
3. **Talent Management and Performance Systems:** Self awareness and proactive behavior are two framing strategies in our findings. Making these explicit can foster self empowerment and self accountability. Using the Seven Strategies to assist organization members, especially young people, to build productive mentoring relationships can provide depth in the organization and an understanding of what it takes to succeed.

Further, regardless of the specific organization initiative, in today's world of tele-working and distance supervision, there is a great need for more opportunities to learn from seasoned colleagues.

Conclusion

Success in a career depends largely on the energetic efforts and abilities of the individual, and this has always been so. As illustrated by our interview subjects, receiving informal mentoring can be profoundly valuable. The strategies they described can provide guidance to others in their effort to cultivate their own mentor relationships.

In addition, support from the organization system is often critical. Our hope is that the experiences of our 24 interviewees will provide both practical approaches and inspiration for others and also will enrich organizations' efforts to grow leaders for the future.

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