

Mentoring Matters

A Lifelong Mentor is the Extra Push in Advancing your Career

By Maya Payne Smart

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WHEN A MENTOR told Angela Butler to keep a binder of her career accomplishments and life events, she was reluctant. She was fresh out of college and working in her first job as an engineer. “I thought it was kind of pack rat-like to keep all this stuff,” she says.

The advice proved prescient, though. The documents came in handy years later when she applied to Columbia Business School and had to recap her entire life to complete admissions essays. Today the assistant vice president for Merrill Lynch Community Development Company still contributes to the three-ring black binder that holds every résumé, performance appraisal, training certificate, kudos e-mail and award she’s received since 1992.

And the mentor who started it all 16 years ago remains a trusted counselor and professional reference. “He was able to get to know me as a person and give what I call three-dimensional advice,” she says.

Mentoring relationships like this one, which span years and add considerable value to the lives of both parties, are hard to develop. Personality clashes, conflicting expectations, changing life circumstances and lack of commitment prevent many from flourishing. But Black MBAs who have been mentored and mentor others say the odds of success improve greatly when you combine self-knowledge, receptiveness to advice and willingness to work.

A FEW GOOD MENTORS

Professionals must have realistic expectations about the time and depth of counsel that mentors are going to offer. Most people will need several mentors in the course of a career to aid their success. “A lot of people look at having one mentor who is Obi-Wan Kenobi or Yoda, so to speak,” says Terrence Chavis, a consultant with DLC Inc. in Dallas. “I think of it as a team – my personal board of directors.”

This multi-mentor strategy distributes the burden of advice-giving across several people, each with differing life experiences and career perspectives to share. “I don’t think you should exclusively have African-American mentors,” says the graduate of Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business. “It helps to have some, though, because we have unique issues and challenges, particularly in a corporate environment where you’re the first Black who has been this or the first Black who has been that.”

Over time you develop a feel for which of your advisers is best suited to help in different situations. Chavis turned to the right person at a critical juncture in his career when he had to choose between the comfort of one position and the challenge of growth opportunities elsewhere. “One of my mentors told me, ‘Sometimes you have to leave home to spread your wings,’ and it really stuck with me. I eventually decided that I needed to leave home,” he says. “I took a job at Blockbuster that allowed me to lead my own department.”

Dawn Clare, president of Spise Bliss, a coaching and consulting firm, also says that each person has an array of challenges that no one mentor can address. “In my view, one should have two types of mentors,” she says, “the type of person who has been very successful in the organization, preferably a white male, and a mentor who understands cultural and gender issues.”



Dawn Clare

The Harvard Business School graduate says that in both cases it is the protégé’s responsibility to drive the relationship by remaining in contact and making interaction convenient for the mentor. “A CEO can get through his whole career without ever having been a mentor, but I’ve never met a CEO who didn’t have a mentor advocate,” she says. “The irony is, they have benefited from someone showing them the tacit rules that are understood but not necessarily discussed, but they don’t have to return the favor to get to that level.”

Both the prospective mentor’s seniority and race make people of color resistant to finding a white mentor, Clare says. “For most mentors or mentees from different backgrounds, it doesn’t feel fantastic because the commonality isn’t there,” she says. “You have to find the commonality instead of it being organic.”

TAKING THE LEAD

Dr. Charles Matthews, a radiation oncology resident at Johns Hopkins Hospital who holds an MD and an MBA from Wake Forest University, also says there must be a bond. “There may not be a cultural or race connection, but there can be a personality connection,” he says. “One thing

I've found is that like-minded people tend to respect each other and tend to connect."

And it's the junior professional's obligation to find common ground by identifying a shared hobby, cause or professional interest. "If you appreciate their contribution to society, that is a really good start," Matthews says. "You can go up to them cold and say, 'I really like the article you wrote on X, Y, Z.' You can establish a connection right off the bat."



Jamil Walker

It also helps to refrain from asking, will you be my mentor? Jamil Walker, a Fordham University business school graduate, learned that a more subtle approach yields the best results. Both times he asked for mentorship directly, the rapport sputtered. Now he simply asks professionals he admires for advice and lets the relationship bloom at its own pace.

One mentor rewarded Walker's patience with a bit of life-changing advice. When Walker was laid off in 2005, he struggled with whether to apply for graduate school or search for a job full-time. His mentor introduced a third option – doing both. The job came first, with the acceptance to business school not long after. Walker worked his way through school and gained analytical and time management skills that serve him well as a publicist with Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI).

Vernell Durand, a senior associate with Duff & Phelps in Morristown, N.J., found success-seeking advice via online communities such as LinkedIn, but notes that the relationship shouldn't end there. "I think it is important to put a name with a face; it enhances a relationship more than sending an e-mail."

Mentors have played a vital role in fueling her success. "One of the benefits is the encouragement to advance my skills, and having someone who has gone down the same road that you're traveling," she says. "Sometimes in corporate America even as a Black female you don't always get the support and it's more difficult, but having people to keep you encouraged, on track and grounded has really been instrumental for me."

RETURNING THE FAVOR



Eric Gilkesson

Eric Gilkesson, senior vice president of business development for Thanks Again LLC, says that the mentor isn't the only one who can add value to the relationship. Protégés can give mentors fresh insights into their work, new perspective on the company and even manpower for initiatives the mentor is leading.

Earlier in his career, The University of Michigan Ross School of Business graduate worked overtime helping a principal at his firm with business development despite a heavy regular workload. Another mentor inspired the Morehouse graduate to actively recruit historically Black college and university (HBCU) graduates to the firm. "Because of her passion for recruiting, I wanted to reciprocate and become a mini version of her," he says. "That was extra work to get in her good graces and a chance for me to return the favor to people behind me."

Moreover, Gilkesson believes that learning to mentor and be mentored is a crucial networking skill that provides access to potential employees, business partners, investors, advocates and other vital connections.

Kaycee Green, a second-year MBA student at George Mason University, says there needs to be more education pushing people to become mentors. "Being a mentor provides an intrinsic satisfaction in knowing that what you are doing is helping someone else toward personal and professional development," she says.

She has found great mentors through work, professors, colleagues and trade groups. The T. Howard Foundation, a nonprofit that tries to increase diversity in the multimedia entertainment business, linked her to mentors, professional resources and an internship with AOL. All are invaluable as she makes a challenging career transition from defense contracting to the media industry.

GIVING BACK

Damian Pryor, a consultant with Accenture in Atlanta, says trust and honesty are critical to mentorship success because they create an environment where both parties can speak candidly. His mentor was assigned to him through a career counseling program at work, but their relationship has grown far beyond obligatory quarterly chats. He values her willingness to speak candidly about workplace challenges and to not sugarcoat responses to his far-reaching questions. "She tells me the real deal," he says.



Damian Pryor

The Mercer University business school graduate also seeks to establish a similar rapport with younger professionals – whether they take the first step or not. "It's important to be a mentor to someone else," he says. "Everybody's been in situations where they've needed help or advice. Don't just take what you've learned and sit on it. Try to pass it along even if they don't ask."

This is exactly what Wenonah Valentine is doing as executive director of The Pasadena Birthing Project, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization that promotes healthy lifestyles in the African-American community. She shares the life lessons she's learned from a succession of mentors with the women she counsels.



Her first mentor offered unsolicited support when she witnessed Valentine's efforts to balance her UC-Santa Barbara schoolwork with single motherhood 34 years ago. "It was refreshing to have someone older than me who came into my life because she knew I needed help," Valentine says. "I didn't know to ask for help."

In 2002, she followed her mentor's footsteps and earned an MBA from Pacific University. Now in addition to leading a nonprofit organization, Valentine is developing a leadership program that facilitates relationships between single moms attending her alma mater and other women who have been in their situations. She hopes the program will give young women "a picture of who they are and what they can be [so they don't] buy into the doom and gloom that many of their peers or even adults may speak to them."

"Isolation never works, so that's the benefit of mentoring," she says. "You have someone with you walking alongside you holding your hand."

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