How to Make the Most of Your Mentoring Experience: A Practical Guide for a Successful Partnership

The official guide of the Senior Executive Association and the Young Government Leaders Mentoring Partnership

MAKE THE CONNECTION
Everyone who Makes it Has a Mentor

Many years ago back when I was still in college, my father gave me an article titled “Everyone Who Makes it Has a Mentor.” At the time, I did not think much of it. I filed it away before reading the article and chalked it up to something my dad gave me to annoy me. It was not until I found the article during a recent move that I realized what a gift my father had given me. It was his way of explaining to me how important others would be in my career. As a past participant of the SEA/YGL Mentoring Program I can now personally vouch for the important role mentors play in one’s career.

Those wanting to be successful in the professional world quickly learn that mentoring relationships are a valuable resource in the path to achieving your professional goals. If you are reading this guide you already understand this need and are probably professionally successful even if you don’t realize it yet. However, many of you are probably wondering how to get from the realization that you need a mentor to creating a successful partnership that allows you to achieve a goal or a number of goals.

Through my experience in the first mentoring cohort, I learned the extraordinary value of having a mentor to provide support and counsel as you navigate the difficult waters of government work. My mentor helped me stay positive under difficult circumstances, listened when I needed her to do so, and made me more successful both at work and at home. She remains and important part of my life over a year later.

This guide is designed to ease your anxiety and give you, the mentee, the tools to structure your partnership in the most advantageous way possible. For some, the mentoring relationship will come easy and many of the suggestions here will not be useful. For others, these tips and tools will be integral in making the most of each opportunity to meet with your mentor. The bottom line is this guide can be used in whatever way you see fit.

From those of us who organize and run this program, we wish you the best of luck in establishing what we know will be one of the most important relationships you experience. If at any time we can help you be more successful, please do not hesitate to let us know. We already know you want to “make it” in government and hope we can help you do just that.
What defines the mentoring relationship?

What is a mentor?

A mentor provides support, encouragement, guidance, and ideas to help the mentee reach goals that are generally defined in a written mentoring agreement. Normally the mentor has a great deal of experience in his or her field and acts as a trusted confidante to the mentee. The mentor may share their personal knowledge and experiences to help promote self-discovery for the mentee.

A mentor will:

• Encourage you to look at a wide variety of options and consider alternative courses of action in order to solve problems you are experiencing; however, he or she is not there to provide answers or solutions.
• Help you gain new skills, experiences, or knowledge or help you set up a plan to do so.
• Help you develop new behaviors and attitudes to improve your professional performance.
• Develop your ability to be resourceful in determining how to use new knowledge and skills in your daily life.

It is important to recognize that this is a professional relationship, although at times it might feel more like a personal one. Also, it is important for both parties in the mentoring relationship to feel comfortable. The information in the following pages will help you to structure your relationship in a way that ensures both you and your mentor are able to achieve the maximum benefit of your relationship and feel comfortable pursuing this partnership.
What defines the mentoring relationship?

Roles and responsibilities

Mentee

Generally speaking, it is up to the mentee to drive the relationship. Usually this means the mentees plans meetings, whether online, by phone, or in person, and decides what specifically will be discussed during the meeting.

It is also the mentee’s responsibility to determine the goals of the partnership as part of drafting the mentoring agreement, which is then agreed upon by both parties.

It is key for the mentee:

• To listen in order to understand.
• Ask questions frequently to ensure clarity for both parties during discussions.
• Be prepared to act and report back during the next meeting to continue progress.

Mentor

The mentor is there to provide support and guidance for the mentee. Generally a mentor will ask questions to encourage the mentee to see alternatives and options to achieve particular outcomes. A mentor will also listen to understand and determine how best to help the mentee.
What makes a mentoring partnership successful?

Defining success will ultimately be up to you and your mentor. Certainly, though, a successful partnership needs to start off strong. Your first meeting is vital because it will set the tone of the partnership. Thus, there is work you should do in advance of your first official meeting to ensure it is successful. For example, it is best to draft up a mentoring agreement which includes defining goals for your partnership before meeting so both the mentor and mentee understand the ground rules from day one. Having a draft agreement can also lessen the anxiety that will likely accompany your first meeting because it will give you something to discuss.

Going forward, success will truly be what you make it. It may be that you and your mentor view success as you achieving your goals on a certain timetable or you making incremental progress between meetings. Or it may simply be that meeting once a month to talk about a certain issue or issues is success. This is what makes the mentoring agreement so incredibly important in establishing your partnership.

After the first meeting, it is important to build trust to ensure success. It is important to:

• Get to know each other. You both need to share information to understand each other’s viewpoint. Do not be afraid to share details about yourself with your mentor or ask questions about your mentor.

• Do what you say you are going to do. Be reliable and follow through on tasks established during meetings.

• Communicate openly and honestly. Ask for and provide feedback on a regular basis to ensure both you and your mentor understand the direction your partnership is heading and can course correct when necessary.

Your partnership and how you define success will almost certainly evolve over time. By establishing guidelines early and discussing them often, you will ensure this evolution is productive.
Adding Structure to your partnership

The Mentoring Agreement

Creating a mentoring agreement is key to establishing the framework for your partnership. Sharing a written document ensures that both you and your mentor are on the same page throughout the program. It also provides a framework for determining whether your mentoring partnership is successful.

The first step to creating a comprehensive mentoring plan is to define your goals. The will allow your mentor to determine how best to help you. Try to establish three to five goals. These goals may be interdependent or completely unique. They can also be professional development goals, skills development goals, or educational in nature. It is important to spend time discussing these with your mentoring who may have a sense of how much can be accomplished during the official length of the partnership (i.e., 6 months).

Next it is important to draft a document that defines logistical aspects of your partnership, including:

• When meetings will be held (e.g., weekly, twice a month, two times a week, etc.). Do you want to schedule them months in advance or just a month at a time?
• How meetings will be conducted (e.g., face-to-face, by video conferencing, by telephone, etc.).
• The length of meetings (e.g., 30 minutes, 45 minutes, 60 minutes, 90 minutes, etc.).
• Who will initiate the meetings, the mentor or the mentee. Will one of you provide a calendar invite? Or send meeting reminders at particular intervals?
• How any geographic differences will be dealt with, if necessary.
• What topics will be covered during meetings. Will you let conversation flow naturally or have an agenda related to your goals?
• How you define success. Will there be check-ins on goals at each meeting? Or, is a longer-term view necessary for the mentee to feel motivated toward continued progress?
• Your confidentiality agreement. Are the details of your meeting kept between mentor and mentee? Or can these details be shared with others? To what extent can you share information?
• How you will conclude the partnership, whether early or at the end of the official mentoring period. Will you potentially stay in contact? Will this be informal or at regular intervals? What happens if you end the partnership early?

Finally, ensure that both you and your mentor are comfortable with the contents of the agreement. It may make sense for you to formally sign the document or perhaps just to provide a copy via email. Again, do what works for your partnership.
Defining Your Goals

Setting goals is essential to working effectively with your mentor. Figuring out where to start, however, can be challenging.

First, it is important to remember that there is a fixed time-frame for the formal mentoring partnership. You may continue your relationship after six months, but it may make sense to ensure your goals are attainable during that time-frame. If it is clear they are not fully attainable, you want to ensure that you can make substantial progress within that time frame. You may also choose to have several short-term goals that are attainable and several long-term goals that you and your mentor understand will not be achieved within the six-month timeframe.

Next, it is key to determine what area of your professional life you would like to focus on. Do you want to develop soft skills, like those needed to move into a leadership or managerial role? Do you want to develop skills to help you with your current role? Are you goals to achieve a certain level of formal or informal education? Should your focus be on getting a new job or pursuing a new career path? Remember that you want to develop three to five goals and they can vary greatly.

Finally, write down your goals. Ensure there are concrete steps you can take to progress towards these goals during your mentoring partnership. It may help to use a method such as S.M.A.R.T.E.R. to establish your goals but doing it informally can work as well. The more effort you put into defining how your mentor can help you throughout your partnership, the more you will get out of the time you put in later.

If you are having difficulty writing goals, please feel free to contact clo@younggov.org for more guidance and assistance.
Continuous evaluation is key to a successful mentoring partnership. You and your mentor may decide on a formal schedule for evaluating what is and is not working in your partnership. Or, you may just want to allow this monitoring to occur naturally.

If you do choose to plan a more formal evaluation, doing so monthly or at the halfway point of the program is a good plan. By periodically assessing the effectiveness of your partnership, you are recommitting to working towards the goals you defined in your mentoring agreement, course correcting if there is a need to do so, and identifying problems and potential solutions.

There are three areas you will want to focus on to evaluate effectiveness:

1. **Time and energy** – making time to meet or communicate can be challenging and yet it is key to an effective mentoring partnership. Ask yourself questions like “Am I investing sufficient time and energy?”, “Is my mentor?”, and “Am I making mentoring a priority?”.

2. **Suitability of the mentoring match** – it is important to assess the mutual benefit of the partnership. You may determine that the relationship is no longer beneficial and should be wrapped up. Ask questions like, “As the mentee, am I getting what I need from this partnership?”, “As the mentor, do I have the experience and resources my mentee needs?”, and “Are both parties committed to the process?”.

3. **Accomplishments thus far** – by looking at successes incrementally, you can both find ways to stay motivated and potentially establish additional goals to work toward. Some questions to ask may be “What are the most important accomplishments of our partnership to date?” and “How much more work do we have to do before we achieve the goals established in our mentoring agreement?”

Remember that monitoring progress is up to you and your mentor. The process may be very straightforward or something you have to work at doing on a regular basis. Whatever the strategy you adopt, occasionally checking in is key to a successful mentoring partnership.
Tips for those building partnerships from afar

Living in different geographic areas can make establishing a mentoring partnership challenging, but it can be done. Some mentees even find the anonymity that a long-distance partnership provides to be helpful in being open with their mentor. The important thing is for both the mentor and mentee to understand some of the limitations and agree on ways to overcome the challenges such a situation can create.

It is especially important for these relationships to be governed by a thoroughly discussed mentoring agreement. You may need to include additional logistical details such as who will make the phone call for a scheduled meeting, what number that person should reach the other at, how you will deal with any time differences, or what you will do if one of you happens to be in the others geographic area during a certain time period. Establishing a plan early will set a framework that will ease some of the complications that can arise when you do not have the option of regularly scheduled, face-to-face meetings.

It is also important to establish the best way to meet. For some, speaking by telephone is sufficient. Others may find that a video conference works well. Email is another great way to provide updates and ask questions. Talk about what is most comfortable and feasible for you and your mentor early in your partnership.

Also, planning is absolutely vital in making this type of mentoring partnership work. It may help to prepare an agenda for the conversation beforehand to ensure robust discussion and make both parties feel comfortable without the facial and body queues you would get were you physically meeting in the same place.

An of course, communicate with your mentor about what is working and the challenges you face along the way. It can be challenging for a mentor who is trying to provide guidance to someone he or she has never seen face-to-face because there is less context about your personality upon which to base a mentoring strategy. By acknowledging this in the beginning and being willing to share details about yourself you can build rapport and trust to make your partnership successful.
What if the partnership is not working or there is a need to end the partnership early?

Effective mentoring meetings should provide both you and your mentor with a feeling of purpose and achievement. If you are not finding this to be the case, it may be time to consider terminating your partnership. While it can be difficult, ending your partnership early is more advantageous to both parties than continuing to work together when it no longer makes sense.

There may also be times when you achieve the goals of the partnership earlier than originally anticipated, and it makes sense to formally end the mentor-mentee relationship.

Or perhaps one or both of you cannot commit to meeting because of time constraints. A common complaint is that a mentor or mentee ceases to respond without any explanation. This can be frustrating, and it is often better to end the partnership early than leave someone feeling disrespected.

Regardless of the reason, it is important to be honest with your mentor. Ensuring you and your mentor established guidelines for ending your partnership early when you created your mentoring agreement will make this transition much easier.

A possible plan for closing out your mentor-mentee partnership may include any or all of the following steps:

- Reviewing the original purpose for the relationship and the goals the mentee identified.
- Summarizing what you accomplished during your time together.
- Review the mentee’s progress towards his or her goals.
- Strategizing the next steps for the mentee.
- Determining what your relationship will look like going forward.
- Celebrating the successes you have achieved together.
Additional Tips for Success

• If you have never taken a personality or strengths assessment, consider doing so early in your partnership. Understanding certain fundamental aspects about yourself will likely help your mentor to assist you more effectively and help you to establish goals for the partnership that are better informed. It also helps to share the results with your mentor.

• Never be afraid to ask questions. Your mentor has an expansive wealth of knowledge. Use it to your advantage by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions. Your mentor wants to help you and is prepared to share his or her wisdom; he or she would not have agreed to be a mentor otherwise.

• Most mentors are willing to speak outside of scheduled times but be sure to discuss this before it becomes an issue. Conversely, remember that your mentor has a lot on his or her plate too and be respectful of your time together.

• Remember that as the mentee you are the driver of the relationship and ultimately the effort you put in will determine whether your partnership is successful.

• Remember that mentors are volunteering their time in order to pass their skills, abilities, and knowledge to their mentees and often get just as much out of the program as their mentee does. As one mentor from the first SEA/YGL Mentoring Program cohort stated:

  To my fellow executives trying to figure out how to shoehorn a bright mentee into their hectic work life I would say this. Do it because it’s the right thing, a chance to give back for the mentors that have given you a hand up during your professional journey. Or do it because it’s the smart thing, a chance to spend an hour or two in active reflection each month with a bright young person whose life will be improved, along with your own. I was surprised at home much I learned about myself, even after all these years. But either way, just do it.

• Finally, remember that having a mentor should enrich your life and be a fun experience. Enjoy the time you have together because it will go by very quickly.
Young Government Leaders is a 5,000 member, non-profit organization committed to providing the authentic voice for our generation of aspiring government leaders. We are actively building a community of leadership for young public servants across the country through professional development activities, networking opportunities, social events, seminars, fellowships, and scholarships. You can find out more and join for free on our website (www.younggov.org).

The Senior Executives Association is a nonprofit professional association that promotes ethical and dynamic public service by fostering an outstanding career executive corps, advocates the interests of career federal executives (both active and retired), and provides information and services to SEA members. You can find out more and join on our website (www.seniorexecs.org).