

BORROWING EXPERIENCE

“What [a person] knows at fifty that he did not know at twenty is not the knowledge of formulas or forms of words, but of people, places, actions—a knowledge gained by touch, sight, sound, victories, failures, sleeplessness, devotion, love—the human experiences and emotions of this earth and of oneself and of other men.”

~ Adlai Stevenson, two-time Democratic nominee for President of the United States

The Best Teacher?

We’ve all heard, “Experience is the best teacher,” but it’s simply not true. Experience is not the best teacher; it never has been and never will be. Maturity doesn’t always come with time; sometimes age brings nothing more than wrinkles and gray hair.

Experience is not the best teacher; *evaluated* experience is the best teacher. Reflective thinking is needed to turn experience into insight. We draw lessons from the past only when we study it. I have a habit of spending time each evening in reflective thinking. When I get ready for bed, I take ten minutes to look back on my day—conversations I’ve had, people I’ve met, things I’ve done, statements I’ve said—and I make note of significant lessons.

Now, the younger you are, the less experience you have to evaluate. Since you have limited firsthand experience yourself, look to borrow it from a mentor. Listen, learn, and ask questions from somebody successful who has gone before you. A wise leader never stops seeking to glean from the experiences of others.

Take Action: Looking for a Mentor

There’s no specific formula when it comes to finding a mentor, but these steps can aid your search.

1) Conduct an Honest Self-Assessment

Write down responses to the following questions: Where am I in my career? Where do I hope to be in the future? What are my strengths and weaknesses? What obstacles are keeping me from growing to my potential?

2) Clarify Your Purpose

Go into a mentoring relationship with a goal. Ask yourself: What do I hope to gain from the relationship? You may be interested in learning a specific skill, obtaining advice on an important decision, or gaining insight into a problem. Whatever the case, spend time on the front end to get clear about your purpose for pursuing the mentoring relationship. Put your purpose on paper. It will help narrow your search for the right mentor as well as keeping you focused on your main goals.

3) Consider Possible Mentors

After assessing where you are professionally and clarifying why you want to be mentored, the next step is to identify prospective mentors. Obviously, you want to find someone with experience and expertise in the areas where you hope to grow. Additionally, the more they share your values, the better.

You probably already have someone in your network with the combination of skills and experience that you're looking for in a mentor. If not, ask for referrals from trusted coworkers and friends. Don't feel like you have to find a mentor who can help you in every facet of life; just make sure they have something to offer in at least one area in which you hope to grow.

Make a list of everyone who comes to mind as a possible mentor, and then rank your top two choices. Research their interests, background, and involvements, looking for points of connection.

4) Come up with a Game Plan

Before approaching a prospective mentor, come up with a tentative framework for your mentoring relationship. How often would you meet? How would meetings be structured? What would be the duration of the mentoring relationship? Certainly, you'll want to be accommodating of your mentor's preferences, but having a plan in place will facilitate discussion about the nature of the relationship. Also, having a game plan in hand demonstrates to your mentor the forethought you've put in to the relationship.

5) Make the Connection

The last step is asking to be mentored. When approaching potential mentors, express what you respect about them and share why you are attracted by the idea of having them as a mentor. Then, concisely share your goal for the mentoring relationship. Articulate your expectations and be attentive to their goals and expectations as well.

Be mindful that you're asking for a big favor. If they agree to mentor you, make the logistics (schedule, location, etc.) as easy as possible for them. Finally, both upfront and throughout the relationship, show appreciation for your mentor's willingness to invest in you.



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