

What High Achievers Need from Their Mentors

by Ruth Gotian and Andy Lopata

August 19, 2024



Jon Feingersh Photography Inc/Getty Images

Summary. Even the best-performing individuals need guidance to avoid complacency, continue growing, and reach new heights. High achievers need mentors who encourage them to embrace continuous learning and improvement with a growth mindset, develop a deeper... [more](#)

Mentoring high achievers can be one of the most rewarding yet challenging aspects of leadership. These individuals have already achieved significant success, possess a wealth of experience, and have a steady track record of accomplishments. But even the best-

performing individuals need guidance to avoid complacency, continue growing, and reach new heights. What do high achievers need to ensure they keep advancing? Mentorship catered to their precise needs.

High achievers, while accustomed to success, still face failures and setbacks. Their resilience can be tested if they encounter rejection infrequently, making their confidence armor a bit thin. It may take them a bit more time and effort to brush off the rejection, and they need someone with greater perspective to help them see outside the immediate situation and realize that failure is not the end of the world.

Helping them navigate through these bumps without wallowing in self-pity is critical. They need mentors who can provide them with tools to navigate these challenges, turning them into learning opportunities. Effective mentoring can help high achievers avoid stagnation, discover new passions, and expand their influence, ultimately creating a culture of high achievement within their teams and organizations.

As a social scientist who studies extreme high achievers such as Nobel Prize winners, astronauts, Olympians, and other elite athletes (Ruth) and a professional relationships strategist with a strong focus on the role of relationships in career and talent development (Andy), we have seen that mentoring high achievers requires a nuanced approach that is often overlooked or even dismissed. These individuals need more than just guidance; they require mentorship tailored to their specific needs. High achievers need support in maintaining a growth mindset, developing emotional intelligence, and expanding their networks. By understanding and addressing these needs, mentors can help high achievers continue to excel and make significant contributions to their organizations.

Cultivate a Growth Mindset

Successful individuals thrive on achievement and live for the challenge of exploring the unknown. Maintaining a growth mindset is crucial for their continued development. High achievers need mentors who encourage them to embrace continuous learning and improvement. They should be introduced to new fields, technologies, or methodologies that can enhance their existing skills and push them out of their comfort zone. For instance, a seasoned executive might benefit from insights into emerging digital trends or innovative leadership practices.

Pro Tip: High achievers often struggle with accepting failure because they are accustomed to success. To help them embrace failure as part of the growth process, mentors can emphasize the concept of “failing forward.” This means viewing mistakes or failures as valuable learning experiences rather than setbacks.

One approach is to share stories of other high achievers who similarly faced failures and used those experiences to propel themselves to even greater heights. Mentors can also encourage high achievers to reflect on past failures, identifying what they learned and how it contributed to their growth. By normalizing making mistakes and framing it as an essential part of the journey to success, mentors can help high achievers build resilience and maintain their confidence even when things don't go as planned.

Then, take it a step further. Challenge your mentee with thought-provoking questions and scenarios that push them out of their comfort zone. For example: What if your industry underwent a major technological shift overnight? How would you adapt and lead your team through it? Suggest they attend conferences or workshops that stretch their thinking. Encourage them to embrace continuous learning and improvement with the mindset of “It's an experiment, something you should try at least once.”

Reframe the outcome of their work by focusing on what success will mean to them, rather than leaving them to worry about the repercussions of a negative outcome. If they buy fully into the impact they can make, potential failure becomes less of a brake on their possible progress.

Develop Emotional Intelligence and Use Self-Reflection

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is a key differentiator for leaders, especially those already successful in their careers. High achievers need mentors who help them develop a deeper understanding of their own emotions and those of others. This skill is critical for fostering better relationships and decision-making, particularly when interacting with people who have not yet reached the same levels of achievement.

Pro Tip: Establish regular, structured feedback sessions. High achievers are often left to their own devices as they often don't need much oversight. But there is a benefit to having regular check-ins to ensure the individual is stretching their thinking, not getting complacent, and thinking several steps ahead.

During these sessions, focus on specific instances where the high achiever's emotional responses influenced outcomes and help them consider how things might have gone differently – for good and bad. Perhaps they got frustrated with a colleague who doesn't think as quickly and as a result, they had an outburst or took over the situation. Or they missed a signal that a teammate was feeling excluded from an important conversation. This practice helps them gain new perspectives on their leadership style and interpersonal interactions and is particularly useful for those who don't connect with meditation or journaling.

Expand Their Network and Influence

High achievers often have strong networks, but there is always room for growth and improved focus. They will know, at a high level, who to turn to for help and support, but there will always be blind spots in their network — people who could help them or relationships they should be developing further, but who are not front of mind.

A mentor can provide increased focus on uncovering those key relationships, one that will lead to even more impactful results. Introducing them to new, diverse circles can provide fresh insights and opportunities for collaboration.

Pro Tip: Facilitate introductions to thought leaders, industry innovators, and professionals from different sectors. Encourage them to attend conferences, join professional associations, or engage in cross-industry collaborations. Suggest the 24/7/30 model for following up with new contacts: 24 hours after meeting, again 7 days later, and once more after 30 days. This could be a quick email, a connection on LinkedIn, or a comment on their social media post linking it to something previously discussed.

Most importantly, sit down with them and analyze the support needed to achieve their key objectives and where they can find it within their existing network or one degree away.

Mentoring successful individuals requires a nuanced and strategic approach. By fostering a growth mindset, developing emotional intelligence, and expanding their network, mentors can help high achievers break through barriers and reach new heights. The impact of such mentoring extends beyond the individual, driving innovation and excellence throughout their organizations. As mentors, our goal is to challenge, inspire, and support these leaders in their journey toward even greater success.

The best mentors don't just teach; they inspire a perpetual quest for knowledge and self-development. By embracing this philosophy, mentors can guide their high-achieving mentees to not only maintain their success but to evolve and lead strategically with renewed vigor and a strategic vision.

Ruth Gotian is the chief learning officer and associate professor of education in anesthesiology at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City, and the author of *The Success Factor* and *Financial Times Guide to Mentoring*. She was named the #1 emerging management thinker by Thinkers50. You can access her free list of conversation starters and test your [mentoring impact](#).

✕ @RuthGotian

Andy Lopata is the author and co-author of six books on networking and professional relationships, including *The Financial Times Guide to Mentoring* and the host of *The Connected Leadership* podcast.

Recommended For You

PODCAST
Leadership Lessons from a NASA Tragedy



The Business Roundtable's Stakeholder Pledge, Five Years Later



Why Leadership Teams Fail



What Leaders Can Learn from Training Like an Olympic Archer

