

Tips on becoming a better mentor

All the below notes have been taken from either the TechStars accelerator:

<https://www.techstars.com/blog/advice/mentor-manifesto> or the recent (Jun 2025) book by Brad Feld – “Give First: The power of mentorship” (<https://feld.com/book/give-first-the-power-of-mentorship/>)

Shreefal Mehta insert: I recently met with Brad Feld (co-founder of TechStars accelerator and author of *Give First*) and he had a few points to offer when I told him about the BioSaarthi global biomentoring program being launched. I thought I would write down some points from that conversation and include notes from his book for the BioSaarthi mentors to consider as you engage in this global biomentoring program.

You have been selected into the BioSaarthi mentoring program as you have years of industry experience, and as part of that, you have likely either been mentored or been a mentor already. However, on reading the blog posts and book by Brad Feld, I felt that I could become a better mentor and have a better experience if I was able to keep the points from the TechStars Mentor Manifesto in mind. It is with that thought that I put this document together and urge you all to read this and refer to it often in your mentor journey. Of course, buy the book if you wish to learn more as the examples in the book are insightful.

I will mention one important point made by Brad Feld in our conversation - if we view the mentor mentee relationship not as a hierarchical superior-inferior relationship but rather as a relationship that is an interaction of peers, we can energize ourselves and the program – i.e. over time, the mentor is also learning from the mentee as much as the mentee feels that they are learning from the mentor.

So below are the key points from the mentor manifesto – you can read more in-depth using the links in the heading.

Be Socratic

It's not just about asking questions, it's also about how you ask the questions, what you try to accomplish with the questions, and your responses to the answers. Begin by eliminating judgment from your questions. Avoid yes or no questions so the mentee has room to answer. If you – as the mentor – don't understand something, ask. You don't have to show the mentee you are more intelligent than them. You already have established your credibility as a mentor and that should give you confidence in your role.

Try to use your questions to guide the discussion, toward testing hypotheses. Rather than providing or stating the answer, help the mentee figure out the answer or develop a set of new hypotheses they can test. Often, the answer to a question isn't the root cause of the problem, so when this happens, ask why?. Use the Five Why's methodology (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_whys) to get to the root cause of any issue.

Expect nothing in return

When you expect nothing in return, you will often be delighted with what you get. It's quite simple and yet profoundly challenging, given that we are operating in a context of building

businesses, overwhelmed with our base level of work and are thinking about justifying time on activities with an unknown impact. Having determined that this project and mission is worth supporting, you enter the relationship non-transactionally and continue giving without a defined return. This approach may not yield immediate results, but can lead to long-term benefits and build a network of trust and goodwill that can be invaluable. This concept has the power to transform, not only personal and business relationships, but also the entire entrepreneurial ecosystem, fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual support. This isn't altruism - you will get something back, but you just don't have any expectations about what it will be. While there is no direct compensation for mentoring, a mentor can be compensated in many ways. At its core, mentoring is a profound learning experience. Economic opportunities emerge over time. As companies raise money, mentors often become investors in the company. Sometimes, they become compensated advisors. This evolution is natural, but a non-compensated mentor relationship is ideal at the early stages of a company. From an Indian cultural context this is karma yoga.

Be Authentic – Practice What You Preach

Remember that mentees are watching and learning from what you do and say, so you are setting an example for the mentee. For example, if you emphasize the importance of shipping on time, but are consistently late to meetings, that's not authentic. Of course, you will make mistakes. When you do, own them, apologize, correct things, and begin again. That's the best lesson that you can provide to a mentee. Do your words match your actions?

Be Direct. Tell the Truth, However Hard.

While being optimistic is essential, when you aren't direct, the mentee loses an opportunity to hear challenging feedback.

Listen, too

While mentorship begins with being Socratic, it's easy to fall into the trap of asking questions and quickly giving or getting answers. Many people don't listen to the responses carefully, as they are already thinking about the next question, especially when the answer is vague or unclear. The next time you ask a question, empty your mind after the question and listen to the answer. Concentrate on what they're saying. Don't move onto the next question or respond, just listen. Let them talk. Create a space for a short silence before you go onto the next question. Active listening is essential. Make sure the person sees you listening. React. Nod your head. Encourage them. But listen. Deeply. Build your listening muscle by not taking notes until after the meeting. And you will find many more opportunities to also learn something from each meeting.

The Best Mentor Relationships Eventually Become Two Way

The best mentor relationships are really ones that last a long time and that allow both parties to learn and grow with shared ideas experiences and discussions. However, with limited engagements there are opportunities too - if you ask good questions, and actively

listen- for mentors to also learn from mentees, their experiences, their ideas and their up-and-coming perspectives.

Be Responsive

Being responsive means more than just responding to emails and phone calls, more than just being on time for meetings, closing the loop on things you commit to doing, and more than being intellectually or emotionally available. These are “” hygiene issues” – the price of admission for being a mentor. You won’t be effective if you don’t do them. Being responsive means being present, putting yourself in your mentee’s shoes, and making an effort to understand what is happening around them. These actions require emotional intelligence.

Adopt At Least One Company Every Single Year (cohort). Experience Counts.

The most effective mentors limit themselves to one or two companies during the cohort. You don’t magically become a great mentor overnight. Mentors improve by practice, by trying new things, seeing what works, observing the results, and helping others. A mentor has a limited capacity to mentor. Go deep with one company at a time, and do it repeatedly. Being a mentor is not just about guiding others; it’s also a fantastic opportunity for personal growth. It’s a chance to develop and hone your EQ skills, understand and manage your emotions and interact effectively with others.

Clearly Separate Opinion From Fact

Founders, investors, and mentors often assert an opinion as fact. When you challenge someone based on data, they often revert to a position where they express it as an opinion. It is also helpful to separate data from facts. While data is factual, the conclusion from data is usually an opinion or a hypothesis. As a mentor, be careful about being getting trapped in the fact/opinion/data matrix, and be precise about what you say. Your goal is to help your mentee, not to be the most intelligent person in the room.

While mentors can often provide facts or data, their most valuable role is helping the mentee form a hypothesis. A mentor may not always have the answer to a particular question, but they can guide the mentee in developing a better hypothesis. Furthermore, the mentor can assist in setting up an experiment to test the theory or hypothesis, interpreting the results, forming a conclusion and if necessary, stating a new hypothesis. However, many mentees are just looking for the answer, so unless the mentor clearly states that what they are saying is a hypothesis, the mentee may accept it as fact.

Hold Information In Confidence

This can be tricky. There is a simple approach to this: use your judgment. If you are uncertain, ask the person who gave you the information if it is confidential. Fundamentally this is an issue also of reputation. As a mentor, you may receive all kinds of information from the mentee, including ideas, unique intellectual property, or deeply personal emotions. As a mentor, you must confidentially hold all this information while steadily and continuously building credibility with your mentee. One wrong move immediately destroys trust.

Clearly Commit to Mentor, or Do Not. Either Is Fine

In Star Wars, Yoda says to Luke, “Do. Or do not. There is no try.” Yoda is talking about “belief”, and specifically belief in oneself. If you are going to mentor someone, commit to it, your mentee is relying on you. Don’t drop balls, don’t miss meetings, be responsive. And if you can’t fulfill your commitment, say so - don’t ever leave your mentee hanging.

Know What You Don’t Know. Say “I Don’t Know” when you don’t know.

When you find yourself in an “I don’t know” situation as a mentor, try to figure out if you can refer the founder to someone who might know something relevant. Just because you don’t know doesn’t mean you cannot be curious about discovering more - stay engaged and hear what the founder, or the person you referred the founder to, has to say so you can learn from the experience. When you don’t know, be a connector.

Guide, Don’t Control

Experienced mentors would find it easy to assess specific situations and tell the founders what to do, but that’s not your job as a mentor. Instead help the management team or founder understand the problem. Invest time, listen, and keep an open mind. Then surface the issues, helping them realize what’s happening. Discuss the situation and guide them to a resolution, but don’t tell them what to do. Be a guide, not the problem solver or the decider.

At some point, it is appropriate to say what you would do if you found yourself in a similar situation. A successful approach is to narrate how you addressed a similar situation from your own experience and leave it to the founder to process this data point. Don’t force the outcome, or be judgmental if the mentee goes down a different path.

Accept and Communicate With Other Mentors That Get Involved

SM notes: In situations where two mentors are interacting with the same mentee and end up with deferring opinions or perspectives on the situation, the mentee will find that it can be immensely valuable, if a little tense, to have the two mentors hash out and work through the thinking behind their perspectives. This can help not only each mentor learn and appreciate new inputs, but also gives the mentee invaluable experience from their interactions and perspectives and also sees how to potentially work through conflicting issues among management colleagues. This is why the BioSaarthi program has a minimum of two mentors per mentee company. The other reason to accept and communicate openly with other mentors is frankly to open yourself to other opportunities from another experienced person with rich background and networks.

Be Optimistic

As a mentor, your job is not to solve a founders problem. Instead, you help listen and provide data and feedback based on your experience. While this can be done from different perspective, it is most helpful from an optimistic frame of reference.

Provide Specific Actionable Advice

As a mentor, you are not the decider, but the CEO you mentor is. Telling stories to illustrate something is powerful, but your mentee often seeks specific actionable advice. As a mentor, avoid letting the decision burden shift to you. Since your mentee is the one who has to live with the decision, they should also be the one who makes the decision. Be explicit with your mentee about the decision being contemplated. Ensure they understand that your feedback is data, not a decision. Reiterate that this is their decision, not yours - and if they make a decision that you disagree with, remember to support them.

Be Challenging/Robust but Never Destructive

If a mentee isn't following your lead, it is easy for a mentor to get frustrated and irritated and subsequently vent to anyone after the meeting. Continuing to stay in this state of mind is destructive to both.

Being a great mentor means being dedicated to helping mentees build great companies. Make sure you are clear and forceful in your words to ensure you are being heard by the mentees. And then, before you leave the meeting, flip your internal switch to remain dedicated to helping the founders succeed regardless of whether you think they listened to what you said.

Have Empathy. Remember That Startups Are Hard

Most founders encounter imposter syndrome at some point, Empathy is the most valuable tool for a mentor when you notice a founder is struggling with this. When you recognize a situation that a founder is inherently struggling with, do not try to 'fix' the problem. Tell a story from your past that has similar issues. Explain how difficult it was for you. Let the founder relate to your past situation. The mentee often needs someone they can talk to openly and transparently about what they are feeling. By telling your story, you set up a situation where they can talk more, while they are also listening to what you learned from your own experience.

Know when to suspend or defer your advice or judgement. The founder may not be ready to hear your solution, but they will feel your empathy, especially if you relate to their struggle.