

BUSINESS

Are you mentorable?

May 2, 2019 / Lenora Houseworth-Weston

Are you open about the areas where you want help? Respectful of your mentor's time and advice? Here are the characteristics that can make you someone whom other people would like to guide, from mentoring researcher Victoria Black.

This post is part of TED's "How to Be a Better Human" series, each of which contains a piece of helpful advice from someone in the TED community; [browse through](#) all the posts here.

Finding the right mentor (or [mentors](#)) can change the trajectory of your life. Many people in the working world have one, or if we don't, we've looked, wondering, "Would so-and-so make a good mentor?" But when was the last time you asked yourself, "Am I a good mentee?"

If you haven't, that's normal. Organizations typically place much greater emphasis on mentors than on mentees, says Victoria Black, director of a peer-mentoring and coaching program at Texas State University. At the program, she saw some pairings soar and others slump, and she wondered about the different outcomes. One day she heard education professor [Richard Reddick](#) use the word "mentorability" to refer to the ability of mentees to benefit from mentoring. A lightbulb went off.

She recalls, "I thought, 'Gosh, we're not doing a job of putting ownership back on the mentee or, at least, not talking to them about what it means to be mentorable. Often, you just assign a mentor to a mentee and let them go. I put a lot of effort and time into training the mentor and not the same into training the mentee.'" A [2017 study coauthored by Black](#) looked at postsecondary mentoring programs at public, four-year educational institutions in her state and found that programs were four times more likely to address mentors than mentees.

The key to mentorability is an open and reciprocal partnership between mentor and mentee. Think of it as being on a long car ride together, Black says: "The mentee is the driver, and the mentor is the copilot, helping them get to their destination." Even though they may receive a lot of input, the mentee is the person in control, and they must respond to the mentor's advice and give continual

feedback about their needs. For mentees, she says, “Success is not just having a mentor tell you or show you what to do. It’s a two-way relationship.”

Are you a good mentee? Black shares the principal characteristics of mentorability.

1. You understand the value of their time.

Your mentor is giving you that most precious and rare of commodities: their time. Show them you appreciate it by arriving on time or early to see them and not cancelling at the last minute unless there’s an emergency. Prep for your meetings, and come with questions, comments or articles to share. Then, when the two of you are together, give your mentor your complete attention. If she sends you a text or email that requires a reply, try to respond within 24 hours; if you can’t, explain why. While this may sound incredibly basic, Black says carelessness about mentors’ time has been a common complaint in pairings that have faltered.

2. You’re clear about what you’re looking for from a mentor.

People seek out mentors for different reasons. Do you want overall career guidance, or do you have a specific goal — such as finding a new job or achieving a promotion — in mind? Are you looking for a more senior colleague who will actively champion you within your organization? Or do you want general life advice? Are you someone from an underrepresented group who wants a role model from a similar background to tell you how to navigate particular obstacles? The more specifically you can articulate your expectations and objectives, the more likely you are to receive the guidance you’d like.

Many of us feel like we want to show only our best face to prospective mentors, but you may [need to expose your problems and limitations](#). One of Black’s most rewarding mentees was a student who was in danger of failing out of school. He showed up at her office and, she says, “admitted he was struggling in college and said he wanted to change.” After three semesters of weekly meetings with her and adhering to her schedules and timelines, he was able to get off academic probation and has gone on to succeed.

[Showing vulnerability](#) is equally important in your ongoing partnership. When she asked a group of mentors about mentees, she says, “They wanted somebody to be realistic, to be real with them and not sugar-coat their experiences but talk about their flaws in ways that helped them grow.”

3. You can accept input, advice and — sometimes — criticism.

You've turned to a mentor because they have knowledge or experience that you don't possess. However, cautions Black, "you may not like what you hear all the time. Be ready to receive their feedback, and then decide whether or not you want to take it."

If you disagree with them, examine your attitude. Remember, their advice most likely comes from a positive impulse: their desire to help you grow. Black says, "Ask yourself, Why do I not agree? Why does this make me feel uncomfortable? Is this pushing me past my boundaries?" Your reluctance may have more to do with a fear of leaving your comfort zone or an unwillingness to change than the quality of their instructions. It's also possible that their suggestions may not fit your larger objective, so if this is the case, let them know.

If you decide not to follow their guidance, it's still important to express your gratitude. After all, they've put time and thought into what they told you. Black has seen some mentees simply ignore input they don't like. Social media has affected our behavior, she explains, "that if we don't like what somebody has to say, we don't think we need to respond."

Instead, be your best self. In person or over email or text, say a simple "thank you" and briefly and politely explain your decision. As in any healthy partnership, communication is critical. Your feedback will enable your mentor to learn how they can best coach you. "With the best intentions, mentors might give you advice that works for them, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to work for you," says Black. "Finding the best way for the mentee to thrive on their own and helping them make their own decisions is what good mentoring partnerships are about."

4. For the lifespan of your relationship, you keep asking, "Am I a good mentee?"

Periodic reassessment is an important part of the process, according to Black. Two other questions to reflect on: "Am I committed to this partnership?" and "How can I be a better mentee?"

5. You're open to whatever you can learn from your mentor.

While you may not get what you want or expect from your partnership, it can still be immensely valuable. "Not all relationships are meant to be fruitful," says Black. "That doesn't mean they can't help you develop." Maybe you'll come out of it with new information, a new skill, a new perspective, or a new friendship.

Watch her TEDxTexasStateUniversity talk now:

https://ideas.ted.com/are-you-mentorable/?utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=linkedin.com&utm_content=ideas-blog&utm_term=business

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