

Media Article



Vocational Guidance Services

DO YOU NEED A MENTOR?

I was asking a candidate about her references this week when she described her previous boss as her "mentor". 'Really?' I asked – and her reply took me by surprise, "we used to fight all the time, I learnt so much from him", she said. Intrigued, I called her reference, who made no mention of fighting, but said he enjoyed his time working with her.

So who are mentors, what makes a good mentor and do we need them? Mentors tend to be those more senior, experienced or qualified than us, and people we call to tap into for advice. Even senior managers need advice, as it is especially lonely at the top. Contrary to popular belief, mentors do not need to be people of immense importance (Mandela would be a great mentor, but would he find the time to listen to your career woes?) but someone you respect, can trust and is a good listener. If those characteristics fit, even your father could be your mentor. Someone who can fill your experience gap and assure you they have faced the same challenges along the way as you are now would be a good fit.

Some people remain in touch informally with the same mentor through out different jobs or careers, whilst others develop mentors (normally senior managers) in each organization they have worked in.

Some organizations are seeing the value of mentors to developing internal skill and are setting up formal mentoring schemes for all new in-take.

Ideally, the role of mentor and 'boss' are very different so don't expect your line manager to be an automatic mentor. Line managers need to ensure you perform, whilst good mentors should be there to listen – especially when you are having trouble with immediate bosses. Good mentors do not provide you with clear-cut answers, but tend to guide you through a process until you find your own solutions.

So, aside from being successful career people themselves (a recent poll in UK showed most people would choose Richard Branson as a mentor), other important mentor qualities would include empathy, sympathy, listening skills and generosity with their time. Very formal mentor schemes in UK for CEOs may well cost Ksh. 5 million, but realistically, a regular informal lunch with your mentor may be all you need.

Good mentors will not be able to tell you what to do, make your boss like you or be a 'one- stop career shop!' But mentors will encourage your goals, be able to compare your experience with theirs, reassure you that you are not alone, and help refer you to a wider business network.

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