

How to Adopt a Mentor without Really Asking (But Here Are the 10 Best Questions Anyway)

Highlight

Do you know what Bill Gates and Luke Skywalker have in common? A great mentor. You can, too, by asking these Best Questions suggested by seasoned mentors and savvy career experts.

The 10 Best Questions

1. Any thoughts on how to...?
2. Could I share with you how your work (or your success story) has impacted me?
3. What can I do for you?
4. What deliberate steps, if any, have you taken in planning your own career?
5. From your perspective, how can we maximize our time together?
6. What lessons have you learned from past failures?
7. Are there any topics you would rather not discuss?
8. In your opinion, how can I outperform my peers?
9. Realistically, how often are you available to connect with me? What's your preferred method of communication, calls, emails, texts, Skype, or chatting over coffee?
10. What's your version of an ideal mentor- protégée relationship? Where do you see my strengths and growth areas?

The Golden Question

The million-dollar question you almost forgot to ask.

Could I contact you later to let you know how your suggestions worked out for me?

The 10 Best Answers

1. Any thoughts on how to...?

Seasoned protégées and mentors agree that “easy does it” is the best kick-off for informal mentoring relationships.

Shellye Archambeau, chief executive of MetricStream.com told the *New York Times*. “A big lesson for me was that if you ask directly, ‘Would you be my mentor?’ they literally step back. I’d just start treating them like it. It’s worked well and is simple. At the end of a routine conversation I’d say, ‘Any thoughts on how to...?’ just to get the interaction going.”

Life coach Kathleen Barton agrees. “Start with, ‘Could I get your advice on my project?’ Keep your requests specific. ‘Mentor’ can be a loaded word so use it only after you both have defined what it means.”

Build rapport first and then woo your mentor with the following questions.

2. Could I share with you how your work (or your success story) has impacted me?

Craft a sincere and succinct email or chat explaining specific contributions or what you admire about this person, such as his recent presentation, award, or decision. Relate it to your own experience and aspirations.

Performance coach Phil Drolet writes for *Entrepreneur Magazine*, “Spend time on this step to figure out how you can add value. If you want to have a world-class mentor, you must be willing to earn their favor as a first step.”

3. What can I do for you?

Drolet says, “To get people to work with you, give them an incentive.” Mentoring is a two-way street.

To clarify your potential contributions, ask yourself:

- How can I add value to this person’s life/career?
- What skills or knowledge do I have that they lack?
- What might be keeping them up at night? How can I help?
- Who do I know that might be useful to my mentor?

[Related: Develop a Great Relationship with Your Mentor by Asking These 10 Best Questions](#)

4. What deliberate steps, if any, have you taken in planning your own career?

Get the stories rolling says certified coach Linda Bidlack of Rockville, Maryland. Bidlack suggested questions like these to the QDoc:

- In retrospect, what if anything, would you have done differently?
- How do you learn how you’re perceived by their organization or boss?

A dozen mentoring experts suggested the following questions to a research team at the George Washington University in Washington, DC:

- What experiences/qualifications and degrees do you have within your field?
- How do you define success? How has your definition changed over time?

Stay focused on the mentor, not yourself. Wait until you've deepened the trust and rapport before you ask any questions centered on your own needs or pop the Big Ask, "Will you be my mentor?"

5. Have you had your own mentors? Any now? What did you learn from them?

This is a great chit-chat opener to break the ice and just get to know each other better.

Denise Morrison, former CEO of Campbell Soup Company is so grateful for her own mentors that she said in an interview, "Now I'm so dedicated to mentoring that I spend as much as 20 percent of my time advising and helping others."

6. What have you learned from past failures?

It's smart to sniff out the toughest mentors, ones who have survived multiple failures. The ideal mentor lost her ego a long time ago and is highly self-reflective about lessons learned the hard way.

Ask this question after you've established mutual comfort and trust. Keep in mind this takes longer in virtual relationships, especially if you don't have a prior history of face-time together.

7. Are there any topics you would rather not discuss?

This can be huge or it can be nothing. Some people in certain organizations or professions need a promise for strict confidentiality. You may need to say several times that you're mature enough to keep your mouth shut.

It also goes the other way. "Choose only the most prudent, tactful advisers. It's extremely important to protect information," Brian Costanzo of the Entrepreneurs' Organization told *The New York Times*.

Mentoring expert Kathy Wentworth Drahosz advises creating a "no-fault" termination agreement. If this idea appeals to you, choose your timing carefully for this discussion.

8. In your opinion, how can I outperform my peers?

Or ask: What's really needed and admired in this field/profession/organization? Listen carefully for solid advice and biases. This may be a great time to slide into a conversation about your goals and expectations as a protégé.

Pamela Ryckman, author of *Stiletto Network: Inside the Women's Power Circles* says, "A mentor must believe in her protégé, both personally and professionally."

9. From your perspective, how can we maximize our time together?

Ask this as an open-ended question and then pay attention to how the mentor answers. Does he highlight nearly-impossible logistics of meetings and jammed calendars? Or focus on your progress, needs, and success?

If nothing else, you've let the mentor know you respect his time. And you've invited a future partnership while conveying your intention of active involvement.

If the person complains, consider cutting bait now if this person can't or won't make a commitment to you.

[Related: Warning Signs of a Sour Mentoring Relationship: The 10 Best Questions](#)

10. Realistically, how often are you available to connect with me?

Ask: What's your preferred communication: calls, emails, texts, Skype, or chatting over coffee?

Mentoring expert Drahosz suggests asking these questions upfront:

- Our meeting schedule?
- Where?
- When?
- How long?
- Frequency?
- Who will initiate meetings?
- How will we accommodate geographical differences and last-minute cancellations?

[Related: New Mentor and First Meeting: Ask These 10 Best Questions](#)

The Golden Question

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Drolet believes protégés' lack of feedback to their mentor is the reason many mentoring relationships fail. "Following up is vital yet too often it's overlooked," she says.

Get the habit of routinely sending notes that summarize how the mentor helped you, what resources you shared, pending action steps, and next-meeting reminders.

Being grateful and gracious goes a long way in today's wired world. Connect at an emotional level with your mentor and you're golden.

QDoc's Q-Tippers

The more prepared you are, the more you can sound spontaneous because you'll feel relaxed. Think of yourself as a valuable contributor to the relationship, too.

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