

# business issues HEY, HOTSHOT!

BY ANNE SCARLETT

In a world where our time is a precious personal resource, mentoring should be considered mutually beneficial for all parties.



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Turning the typical mentoring mentality on its head can be a great learning experience for both parties.

**YOU KNOW WHAT MENTORING IS.** But have you ever heard of mentoring up?

Mentoring up (also known as reverse mentoring) involves having a less experienced person serve as the mentor to an experienced—often older—mentee. Perhaps you’ve sought out mentors in the past, but have you ever thought about turning that upside down?

In a world where our time is a precious personal resource, mentoring should be considered mutually beneficial for all parties. It’s a win-win-win. As the young professional mentor, you win in myriad ways: gaining personalized access and rapport with a superior, learning how to teach others and becoming more versed with the company and industry. The senior mentee wins, because they get to learn from an “expert” in a low-stakes, casual environment. (Remember, careers don’t need to simply plateau; they can and should be continuous learning opportunities.) And finally, the entire company wins, because cross-learning among employees makes for a work dynamic that’s respectful, fun and likely more innovative!

Intrigued? Here is some advice for you to shine while mentoring up. The focus here is on technology, but of course these tips apply to any unique skills you can offer. The mentor is you, the young professional. The mentee is them, a seasoned professional.

**Be patient.** Look, if you’re teaching the mentee about technology, they may not catch on as quickly as you’d like. Think of those geniuses at the Apple Store. They bring their game face! Regardless of each customer’s technological bandwidth (or lack thereof) the genius trainer remains interested, focused and good-natured.

**Be cool.** On the same note, don’t mock or share the mentee’s weaknesses with peers. Face-to-face camaraderie and occasional teasing is one thing, but snarky jabs are unwelcome and decidedly uncool. If it gets back to them, you’ll realize that some mentees won’t be so easy to laugh at themselves. Keep your approach both kind and professional. And while you’re at it, applaud the mentee for small victories within their learning process, but without being patronizing.

**Be strategic.** By asking good questions, you’ll have the opportunity to create a true collaboration with the mentee. For example, let’s say that the mentee wants to “learn about using Instagram for business.” That’s a pretty broad topic. But if you probe about their specific goals, you will uncover clues that will help you to better focus on what’s most relevant. What if the mentee is a principal in your firm and she wants to boost her reputation as a thought leader in the industry? On the flip side, what if the mentee is the marketing manager and wants to dramatically increase the firm’s social media presence beyond LinkedIn and Twitter? How would you adjust your content and approach when teaching each of these mentees about Instagram?

**Be resourceful.** In the above Instagram scenario, maybe you don’t have all the answers. Perhaps you’ve only used Instagram for personal reasons so far. But maybe you’re in a band and you’ve used it to promote gigs. Maybe you’ve used the platform to share announcements about an extracurricular organization. If you can find relevancies between what you know and what they need, great! If not, why not take some extra time to

research a bit more on the topic. With your preexisting knowledge, it'll be easy for you. And your mentee will appreciate the added effort and value!

**Be respectful.** Remember, one of the many benefits you'll gain is building a rapport (even a relationship) with a senior professional. But if you have an attitude that doesn't sit well with the mentee, then this amazing opportunity to build your internal network can actually backfire. Remember, your mentee has been doing this longer than you have, and they deserve your respect.

**Be perceptive.** Remember when you were in school? You likely discovered that learning styles and preferences vary from student to student. And while all of us are somewhat multi-modal (possessing the *ability* to learn across mediums) we are actually most *engaged* when we learn according to our favorite preference. For me, it's kinesthetic (learning by doing). For others, it's visual. For still others, it's aural. You get the idea. So if you see that your mentee is struggling to comprehend your material, then try presenting the very same content using a different approach. Don't worry; through trial and error, you'll organically discover what approach resonates with your mentee.

**Be goal-oriented and organized.** For everyone's sake, try to define learning outcome(s) and/or a final product. This will give both of you a sense of purpose and something to work towards. Further, stay organized by creating a schedule for when you'll meet,

and for how long. Everyone is busy, so keep it realistic. Maybe it's every other Friday at lunch, for example.

If you think mentoring up is worth considering, then assert yourself! Identify a need and directly offer to help teach/train a mentee. If you want to be even more proactive, why not formally offer it up to your human resources department? Let them know about your special skills and that you'd be more than happy to help out. If your company doesn't have a reverse mentoring system in place, then they may be able to help you navigate how (and to whom) you can be of service.

I know what you're thinking. Work-life balance is essential; no doubt you value it highly! But early in your career, it may be worth this extra effort (and time) to offer up your mentoring "services" to folks in your organization. Yes, this will mean giving up a lunch hour, staying late or (gasp!) coming in early for a morning session. But with solid time management, you can have it all: the upward trajectory early in your career, a bit of free time to pursue your dreams, interests and hobbies and the satisfaction that you've helped someone along in their career—and likely learned something from them in the process. ■

*What are your thoughts on the concept of mentoring up? Have you ever participated in such a process? Or do you think your company would be open to the idea? We'd love your feedback! Send your thoughts to [melnick@aisc.org](mailto:melnick@aisc.org).*