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Finding mentors

I met Norman two years ago. When we first started talking it was purely business. He needed good people to represent his company and we were looking for a great deal on equipment. Norman was the regional representative for Ektelon, the top racquetball equipment manufacturer. One of the main ways they promote their product and the sport is to *sponsor* players. In exchange for a great deal on equipment, the players are loyal to the brand, using only their equipment, wearing clothing with the company emblem, acting as ambassadors, selling equipment to players at the club.

It started out as a business relationship: he gained a team member who was a top salesman and teacher, he gained a top junior player with a ton of potential and a great attitude, we got a great deal on the best equipment in the world and a chance to be part of the team. Slowly, over the course of a couple years, this evolved into a mentorship. Every couple weeks we get together and play. Sometimes it turns into a full fledged lesson. Sometimes, while playing, he nudges us to play at a higher level.

What we have found is that the mentorship far outweighs any material gain, and the material gain is significant (this year alone we received almost \$800 in equipment). The interesting thing is that this goes in both directions. We have become better players and leaders in our sport. We have a better understanding of why we play and what we want to accomplish. He gains a great deal of satisfaction from watching our progress. You can hear the pride in his voice whenever he says "son, you're playing so much better!"

This is just one example of where a mentor has enriched my life. At several points in my career I've had people who actively showed me how to manage, lead, or sell.

Your mentor must profit as well

A one way relationship will not last. Your mentor must receive equal value, sometimes in cash, often in pride and satisfaction. My mentors gained in a wide range of ways. All had the satisfaction of watching me grow. Some were my manager, and my growth helped them achieve their business goals. One was able to take a promotion knowing he left the organization in capable hands.

Another way mentors grow is by learning from you. Sometimes this is because the teacher usually learns more than the student. Other times, they were weak in my area of strength, allowing me to return the favor.

Be a mentor to grow

Mentoring someone can be amazing. You feel so good helping someone grow. You are incredibly proud as you see them achieve higher and higher levels of success. Sometimes there is a financial gain, but this usually is a fringe benefit.

Probably the biggest way I personally benefit from being a mentor is my own growth. It is impossible to walk away without becoming a better man.

How do I find a mentor?

This is the hard part. Sometimes you stumble on them and may not even realize you are being mentored. This often happens when you work for a good boss or business partner.

Most of the time you have to seek them out. Decide what you need help with and find someone who does it well. Find a way to get to know them. Be open to suggestions and ask their advice. Let them know how much you appreciate their help and support.

Often the hardest part is finding a way to get to know them. Some creative ways are:

- If it is business mentorship: develop an idea that is complementary to their market or area of expertise. Approach them to joint venture making it clear that you value their business experience as much as anything

else.

- Another business mentorship idea: go to work for the mentor. If you do it right your mentor will take you under their wing and show you the ropes.
- Find out what activities they are involved in, then put yourself in their path. It is much easier to approach a fellow member of a charitable organization (or country club, etc) than a complete stranger.
- Look for connections. Do you have a common friend? How about a friend of a friend? It is always easier to be introduced that to make a cold call!
- Call them and ask. This may be the hardest way but can be quite effective. They should be impressed that you had the courage and initiative, and they should be flattered that you seek their advice.

When all else fails

Sometimes you just can't find someone to help. Maybe it's because you are just starting out and have so few contacts. Maybe your circle of friends and associates just walk in different circles.

I have personally run into this with our online businesses. I know sales. I understand my industry and business. My challenge is that internet marketing is an entirely new area for me. Trying to find internet entrepreneurs is a challenge. Oh, I can find them in forums and blogs. I'm talking about someone to sit down with and have a cup of coffee. And when I do find someone who has a business online I often find they know as little as me.

When you can't find a mentor, one of the best things to do is go to your local book store. You gain much of the same benefit and wisdom from books. Just be sure to seek out books by (or about) people who have done it. Most books are written by academics. While they have a lot of knowledge it's all based on book learning. You need someone who has been there, done that, and who can guide you through the challenges the real world throws your way.

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