



BRIEFING:
**Guidance on Mentoring
For
WSWE Members**

**The Value of Mentoring to a
Female Entrepreneur or Small
Business Owner:**

For thousands of years, people have been passing their knowledge and experience along to others. It's called mentoring, and as ancient as the process is, it is one of the most powerful development techniques available to professionals.

But as important as it is, it is essential to be sure that you take the time to understand, think about and plan your mentoring partnership **strategy**.

We define a **Mentor** as an individual with the experience, knowledge, and/or skills of a specific content area who is able, willing, and available to share this information with another individual.

A **Mentee** is an individual who seeks experience, knowledge and/or skills in a specific area and who looks to another individual to gain that which is lacking.

Therefore **mentoring** is the use of an experienced individual (Mentor) to teach, develop and coach someone with less knowledge or experience (Mentee) in a given area. Mentoring is a dynamic association between an individual who needs to learn and another who is both able and willing to help and guide the learner.

Note that there is nothing in these definitions to indicate that the Mentor is at a higher level, has a senior-level title, is older, or has more length of time in a given organization. The only thing that puts the Mentor at a more "elevated" level than the Mentee is the knowledge and/or experience the Mentor possesses - which the Mentee needs.

When evaluating a potential Mentor, consider the "*able and willing*" elements of how that role is defined. It is very important to understand that just because someone is *good* at what he/she does, it does not necessarily follow that this individual would be a good Mentor. It takes very specific skills and competencies to be *good* as a *Mentor*, i.e., teach, develop and coach a mentee. It is also important to understand the *willing* part of the partnership – the individual desiring to be a Mentor should really want to be one and be fully committed to the time a mentoring partnership will take.

INSIGHT TO MENTORING: THE STORY OF TWO TRAVELERS:

In the town square of a small mountain village, two travelers became acquainted and began to discuss how they had arrived at their remote location. Each had traveled alone and had followed a similar

**A Note of Appreciation to
Judy Corner, Founder & Principal
Cornerstone Consulting
(www.cornerstone-consults.com)**

The insights and practical advice in this WSWE briefing reflect the life-long work on mentoring done by Judy Corner. She is a recognized expert in the mentoring process as well as an avid supporter of female entrepreneurs.

The WSWE Board of Directors say "Thank you Judy for stating the case so well."

path from the same city but their experiences were quite different.

For the first traveler, the journey was a long and frustrating ordeal. She found her way of limited use because of detours and uncharted obstacles and took considerably longer than anticipated to cross the various mountain passes. At times she felt as though she were wandering in circles. She prayed she would never need to make the trip again.

The second traveler's experience was much different. She described her trip as enjoyable and eagerly anticipated return trips "up the mountain." Upon further questioning, the second traveler revealed a key distinction.

As she had made her final preparations for the journey, she happened upon an individual who frequently traveled to and from the village.

This individual took the time to explain some of the important geographical features that would be encountered on the journey. Not only did the experienced individual counsel the traveler on how to prepare and plan for the required changes in route, she pointed out interesting sites to see along the way, places to rest, and what to anticipate upon arrival as well. This information was accurate and useful.

Why the difference between the travelers' experiences? Both started from the same place, both had similar maps and plans, and both were traveling to the same destination. The key difference appears to be the information the second traveler received from the more experienced person, or Mentor, she met.

The same concept can apply to building a business. More and more, based on rapid change, individuals who create a business – no matter the size - are required to take on new responsibilities, become better problem solvers, and adapt to new circumstances quickly; they are being asked to journey up unknown mountains. There is a constant need for those with greater expertise and experience to assist those at lower experience levels.

P*I*E – PLAN*IMPLEMENT*EVALUATE

When determining if (1) a mentoring partnership is for you, (2) finding an appropriate Mentor and (3) ultimately participating in a mentoring partnership, we suggest you take the following steps:

PLAN

1. Clearly define what you would like to get out of a mentoring partnership.

Establish clear goals and ensure they are based on the outcomes that you want to accomplish. Do this ahead of time – think about it and document your goals. We recommend precise and clearly stated goals for good reason. For example, don't just indicate that you would like to know how to better understand and manage the financial aspects of your business; that is too broad. It would be difficult to identify a Mentor for this need without more clarity. Rather, dig down to specifics such as do you need help with budgeting and forecasting, help with banking relationships and funding or help finding and creating an effective outsourced relationship with a part-time Controller. When goals are very specific, you can do a more effective job of making a match between you and the right Mentor.

In addition, be sure that a mentoring partnership is the best way for you to obtain the knowledge you need. Consider whether you would be better off obtaining the knowledge you need from a specific course, or on-line training program, or book, etc. Based on your own present level of knowledge don't always assume that a mentoring partnership will give you everything you need. It may be that a combination of a training course and a mentoring partnership will be best. Or, it may be a matter of what you do first and second such as taking what you learned through a training course and then working with a Mentor to apply what you learned. See the following format to guide goal development.

AREA OF NEED - #1	
QUESTION	RESPONSE
Describe specifically what you would like to learn in a mentoring partnership?	
If I talked with you several months after your mentoring partnership began and asked you if the desired learning and development had taken place and you say, "yes" -- what would you now be able to do (i.e., "I used to do 'X' and now I can do 'Y'!)?	<i>(This needs to be illustrated in very behavioral and observable "pictures" – what would someone see you do differently?)</i>
In order to achieve the above, what do you <i>imagine</i> as specific steps you would take?	
Specifically where or within what aspect of your business will this knowledge be valuable? Document and elaborate.	

2. Ensure that you have thought about and planned for the time commitment that you are asking someone to invest - as well as the time commitment that you make in the mentoring partnership.

Have some idea about how much time you feel will be involved and ask your prospective Mentor if it is possible to meet those commitments. If your Mentor counters with another time commitment, that is fine – but work it out upfront. There can be great disappointment if you have one set of expectations and your Mentor has another.

3. After you have identified what you want from a mentoring partnership, then examine what you want from a Mentor him/herself.

Don't only choose someone you like – you may get along with this individual, but he/she may not be able to provide you with the real development that you are looking for. Starting and/or building a business takes a lot of time and effort and you don't want to waste it, so make sure your time with your Mentor gets you where you need to go.

Begin by documenting what the responsibilities would be for you as a Mentee. Then document the responsibilities that you believe are those that will be required by the Mentor. This is a bit like making sure that your objectives are clear – each of you need to understand what is expected of the other. Don't just pick anyone as a Mentor – pick someone who is willing (time commitment and a desire to be a Mentor) and able (someone who has the skills/competencies to be a Mentor). There are many individuals that may have the knowledge and experience but are not able to effectively work with others to share and develop this knowledge. This in no way makes this individual "bad" -

- being a Mentor is just not a role that he/she wants to or can fulfill.

Even if the individual would like to perform such a role, he/she may not have the skills/competencies -- such as "Interpersonal", "Coaching and Counseling", "Oral Communication", etc. -- that are necessary for this role. The individual certainly has other good skills/competencies, but if he/she does not possess the above stated skills/competencies, it will be difficult for an effective transfer of knowledge to take place from the Mentor to the Mentee.

4. Have a way to assess your present knowledge levels.

When choosing and communicating with your Mentor, it may be helpful to go back to the "behavioral picture" model that we mentioned before. Be able to illustrate a picture to your Mentor of what you can (and cannot) do in a specific area. This helps your Mentor to understand exactly what skill/competency level you possess and how to work with you. As an example, if you are just beginning to learn a specific skill/competency or knowledge area for your business and your Mentor is an "expert" in this area, it may be difficult for the two of you to communicate. Both of you may become frustrated because the Mentor speaks, uses examples, etc., that are in terms that are way ahead of where you are.

IMPLEMENT

5. Communicate the details to all individuals that will be affected (including family, friends, etc.).

There is a saying that when you own your own business you really only work half days – you just have to decide which 12 hours it will be! The goal of your mentoring partnership is that you will learn skills and knowledge that will eventually help you to be successful and hopefully reduce those 12 hour days. But in the beginning you will probably put more time into the "learning" process with your Mentor than later when the skills and knowledge are more ingrained and natural. Prepare others (like family, friends and colleagues) that this learning is taking place and will take up some extra time. If you were taking a college class, everyone would understand – position the learning time spent in your mentoring partnership as the same.

It may also be important to communicate why you feel that the mentoring partnership is the best way for you to learn what it is you need. Again, many times people understand time spent in a training class or college course, but not the time spent in a mentoring partnership or the "homework" that may be involved based on assignments that your Mentor has suggested.

6. If possible, get some training (whether it's in a course, a booklet, or self-study) on how to be a Mentee.

7. Have a Plan

There should be a plan that is designed to add focus to the partnership and set objectives and determine criteria that will ensure that this is a beneficial experience for both the Mentor and the Mentee.

It has been proven over and over again, that if you don't have a solid plan the chances of accomplishing what you set out to do will be reduced by better than 50-60%. Outline what it is that you want to accomplish with your Mentor and put some timelines and goals to it. Remember that time is often your scarcest resource so don't waste it!

8. Make sure that you and your Mentor have an alternate plan if you cannot always meet face-to-face.

If you are going to use some type of technology, make sure each of you understands it; if you are using video conferencing, make sure each of you has a camera on your computer; etc.

It is important to understand that keeping appointments when you are meeting via technology is just as important as when you are meeting face-to-face. A clear sign of lack of commitment can be seen when appointments that are not face-to-face are continually broken.

9. Make sure to discuss the possibility of a mis-match.

Historically, mentoring partnerships have been based on two individuals that kind of "find each other" and "get along". Although this will work for informal mentoring, it is not a guarantee that an individual in the Mentee role will get the knowledge, development, learning, etc., desired.

A main concern of both Mentors and Mentees is "What do I do if the partnership doesn't work out with my Mentor (or Mentee)?" Most mentoring partnerships start out with the best of intentions. When problems arise that threaten the original expectations and promise of the mentoring partnership, many times they are not deliberate; they happen because individuals were not clear about their expectations. It is important that each member of the partnership understand that "things happen". If you have done everything upfront (i.e. setting clear expectations and objectives, etc.) and it still doesn't seem to be working out, then it is best to part and dissolve the mentoring partnership. If the Mentor and Mentee partnership doesn't "jell" or work, or if it turns sour for either party, there must be a way to conclude it without damage to anyone. Each mentoring partnership should be designed to include a "no-fault" insurance policy for all participants to prevent this problem.

EVALUATE

10. Continually evaluate the mentoring partnership.

It is important that you continually evaluate whether you are getting out of the mentoring partnership what you need and expect. Continually look at the goals/objectives that you set for the partnership and determine if you are making progress towards these goals. Both Mentor and Mentee should agree about major progress checkpoints. Also, make sure that you and your Mentor decide on criteria to determine when you are complete with the mentoring program. Document what it means to be "done".

SUMMARY

When choosing a Mentor, ask a series of questions to ensure you will find a good match. Consider these:

- What is the background of the prospective Mentor?
- How long were they in business?
- What was the focus of the business?
- Are they still in business?
- If not, why not?
- When they started their own business, what did they feel were their strengths and assets?

- In what areas did they obtain help and guidance?
- Where did they go to get it?
- What do they feel are the skill strengths where they feel they can be of assistance?
- Why would they consider being a Mentor?
- What will they gain from doing it?

Then be sure to follow the steps to fully prepare for an effective mentoring experience using this proven formula:

- Plan
- Implement
- Evaluate

About West Suburban Women Entrepreneurs (WSWE)

WSWE empowers the female entrepreneur and small business owner as they build and lead successful enterprises. WSWE offers guidance, support and resources to its members. We are an effective and valued business resource for women business owners because we are committed to helping each and every member achieve their greatest success. Our programs are driven by the needs and requests of members and they help to nurture meaningful relationships among women business owners; relationships that fuel both professional and personal growth.

To learn more, visit: www.wswe.org