

## Why You Need a Mentor By John Sowers

Doing your own thing is awesome, but maybe you're missing something?

These days, it seems like everybody is starting their own businesses. In fact, it's almost surprising to meet a twentysomething who actually has a boss.

In many ways, this is awesome. This generation is one of the most entrepreneurial in a long time.

But, as great as it is to strike out on your own, sometimes people skip the crucial step of learning from someone who has gone before them.

Years ago, before I launched The Mentoring Project, my father-in-law gave me pieces of advice I think everyone needs to hear:

### **Find and Attach Yourself to the Hip of a Master**

Millions of young men and women are confident, smart and talented. Most of them try to “make it” alone. They spend many years trying to figure out a craft, and then start excelling in their late 30s or 40s. But if you can attach yourself to a master (of any profession), you can speed up your mastery and accelerate the process by a decade.

Since I was in my 20s, I have carefully sought out mentors of excellence. The choosing is critical. Masaaki Hatsumi, the famous martial arts grandmaster, once said, “Students deserve their teachers.” Do not choose poorly. But you do need to choose. Look for mentors who are masters in the field. Look for visionary leaders, writers and communicators.

### **Find Mentors Who Believe in You and Listen to You**

Who you allow to speak into your life is a sacred choice. I see many young leaders damaged by submitting themselves to the next strong personality. The strong personality may be impressive and self-confident, but with no personal concern for you. Worse, they may simply flatter and use you to build their own platform.

The same way a good mentor imparts wisdom, character and craft, a bad mentor will impart their habits, reactions and particular worldviews, as well. A bad mentor can be like visiting a bad chiropractor: You leave worse than you start.

When a mentor believes in you, it does not feel like a possessive or controlling thing. He does not insist you do this or that. She feels more like a patient, listening friend. These mentors often

become great guides and friends. They are not just advice-dispensing machines; they are people who are genuinely interested in you.

### **Find a Mentor Who Helps You Discover Your Own Voice**

Many young voices are echoes, striving to sound like others. But echoes have diminishing returns; they get weaker with each reverberation.

When you find your own voice, you will create something original. This is where the power is: finding your divine fingerprint and walking in it, no matter what others think. You are the only you. There is no other precedent.

The mentor who helps you find your voice is a rare gift. Part of finding your voice is allowing others to say hard things and speak direction into your life.

King Solomon once said, “a rebuke impresses a discerning person” (Proverbs 17:10). Be open to criticism, especially from those you trust. The Twitter and blog trolls don’t really matter. They may on occasion say good things, but it’s mostly drama, one-upmanship and attention grabbing—sometimes name-calling and even bullying.

The critics who matter are the ones you know and respect. These critics want the best for you. This is the key in receiving correction and advice. Does this person love you and want the best for you? Is this person seeking your good? Or is this about ego or shaming or control or something else? Some feel obligated to say hard or mean things, which is forced and unnatural.

### **Find People Who are Not Afraid to Tell You the Truth in Love, Especially as You Grow in Influence**

There is a narrow balance here. I have several famous friends who are surrounded by fan friends. Fan friends always smile and say, “You are beautiful. You are brilliant. No matter what you say or do, we are with you.” Fan friends leech off the charisma and fame for meaning and affirmation. They are terrified to say anything that might endanger their precious position.

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You shouldn’t let critics define how you live your life, but you do need friends and mentors who will be honest with you when they see red flags. Even if this is only two people, keep them, value them, appreciate them, listen to them. They won’t always be right, but if you eject all these people from your life, the “Yes” friends can warp you.

Do not be discouraged if you have no great mentors in your life. For years, I had several I only spoke with a twice a year. Even these short conversations and small touches can make a huge difference.

Also, some of your mentoring community can live in your mind (but not more than a third). Seek out the great voices, the writers and leaders and thinkers of history with whom you resonate. Devour books. Read letters. Find and emulate the rhythms of the great ones.

It turns out, what's missing from a lot of millennials' professional work is a mentor.

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