



Anyone Who Makes It Has a Mentor



Twenty years ago, Don Perkins, who was an outside Board member for the company that I was running at the time, gave me a copy of an article that he had authored for the Harvard Business Review a few years prior detailing the benefits that accrue to CEOs that have mentors.

Don was my mentor at the time, a role that was formally put in place for me as CEO by my Board, and the Board also established a formal mentorship program for each of the other senior executives that reported to me.

This notion of *mentorship* is of course not new, but I think the idea of establishing formal mentoring relationships has taken on new complexity in this era of #MeToo and political divide. It makes the establishment of mentor relationships that much more difficult to arrange which is precisely why this is a timely topic to explore today.

In the world of sales, no relationship is more important and more impactful on performance and revenue growth than that of the first line sales manager to his or her team. An individual salesperson's performance will be materially

impacted, for better or for worse, by the quality and skill of the management and coaching provided by this sales leader. However, effective sales management is not a substitute for mentoring. Indeed, all sales people, actually all business people, will experience meaningful benefits that can only come from a mentoring relationship.

For review, what are the differences between a mentor, a manager and a coach? A mentor is not typically a person who works in the same company, unless one works in a very large enterprise where the vast number of people make this workable. Typically, a mentor is significantly more experienced, and generally they are older than the mentee. The mentor is not the boss; he or she can't tell the mentee what to do. Both the mentor and mentee are volunteers in the arrangement, whereas a sales

manager is typically setting the agenda, directing the content of a coaching session and providing very specific feedback. The focus of a sales manager is current performance. The focus of a mentor is on the long term; helping the mentee grow in his or her career. There must be an environment of complete trust; the mentee knows that the mentor will not judge, they will not speak out of school, and that all mentor/mentee conversations are private. The mentor has an obligation to be honest with the mentee, to provide advice and feedback that at times the mentee will not want to hear. The mentee has a responsibility to hear what the mentor is saying, and to incorporate feedback into their actions to drive long-term career growth. The mentor hopefully will elevate the performance of the mentee in a way that a manager/subordinate relationship never can.

Being a CEO is a difficult job. Being an effective professional salesperson in 2018 is also an extraordinarily challenging role. The requirements for success have never been higher, and the barriers one needs to overcome to engage buyers in a mutually satisfying relationship have never been more difficult to navigate. So, given this, how does an aspiring sales professional find a person who will be enthusiastically willing to devote the time and energy (and take the personal risk that comes with the role) necessary to be an effective mentor.

Like most things in life, this will not happen without effort. The professional salesperson will need to demonstrate skill, drive and ambition to others he or she meets. No senior person wants to invest time in a person they don't respect and appreciate. But the burden of finding a mentor is primarily the responsibility of the salesperson. He or she must be looking to build a body of connections so that one or more of these connections may evolve to a mentorship relationship. I have seen many ways that more enterprising salespeople have pulled this off. One salesperson who worked for me a number of years ago actually developed a number of relationships with clients that evolved into

mentor/mentee relationships. One of these executives was at the time a CFO of a large public company. Today, that executive is now the CEO of the company, but the mentor/mentee relationship with my former colleague has carried forward to this day, nearly 20 years later. I have seen mentor relationships result from relationships with suppliers. I have witnessed mentor relationships start when a person is in school and a connection is made with a given professor. Graduate schools, or executive education seminars provide a rich environment to meet talented executives who might ultimately become good mentors. Clubs can be good venues for meeting people as well. The point is to think about this with intent, and to be on the hunt to meet and engage a given number of people who might someday be willing to help.

While I daresay that individual salespeople have to take personal responsibility to find mentors, it is also my view that executives who have experienced success in business and in life also have a responsibility and obligation to be on the lookout for young people who will benefit from a professional mentorship relationship. Each of us will not have to look far; you will meet these people in random business meetings, in travels, while teaching and speaking. Find some limited number of people you interact with and offer to be helpful. Make some introductions, ask some questions, and if asked, provide feedback and advice. Some subset of these relationships will evolve to the next level. Both parties will be enriched through the experience. And each of you will come to learn what Don Perkins wrote about so long ago: anyone who makes it has a mentor. ■

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