

Mentoring Matters

Strategies to get Most out of a Mentor-Mentee Relationship

By Akshay Talati

Editor's Note:

No matter where you are in your career, you will find this article empowering. It is written from the heart by a senior leader who has worked at three of the largest cosmetic companies in the world. He knows the Ring-of-Fear personally that we all live inside of. He asks you to recognize it and offers a workable path to step out of the ring and into your life's work, desires and legacy.

"The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image but giving them the opportunity to create themselves." – Steven Spielberg

"Context is Decisive" – Werner Erhardt

Begin your Journey

I have been fortunate to have mentors throughout my career who have understood me and who exploited my abilities and along the way, I was always surprised by my true potential. Mentoring is the ability to guide, support, and nurture others while inspiring them to bring out the best in themselves.

The cosmetic industry, while spread out across the world, is truly a small family where everyone is connected, especially these days in the internet era. A couple of decades ago, the beauty industry was quite unknown to most and entrants stumbled in by chance coming from pharma, chemical engineering, biochemistry, or allied industries. I entered the beauty industry by taking a leap of faith coming from a pharmaceutical background. I was certainly nervous at first but having experienced the creativity and diversity in cosmetics, there was no looking back.

Today, there are entrants to the World-of-Beauty from various disciplines through specialized educational programs. Additionally, there is an abundance of free information available online and through national, and local cosmetic chemists' societies and mentoring initiatives.

There is also an influx of people with young creative minds and influencers who have tasted fame on social media and have become overnight entrepreneurs. However, even with the wealth of information available, there is still a need for the true guidance of young cosmetic scientists. Cosmetic scientists that are young-in-age or young-at-heart, regardless of their age. **Throughout my**

career, I have had the wisdom of being a mentee as well as a mentor. Even today, I still consider myself a mentee as learning never stops. Some of the tips I offer below are from both perspectives and real-life experiences.

An Important Distinction

Inspirational vs Aspirational Mentors –

My advice to you, the reader, is to **always have two mentors**

• Inspirational Mentors

These are leaders that are most similar to you; the way they work, their character, their morals, and the way they lead by example. These are the ones you most relate to as they provide you with guidance, comfort, and necessary support. When I reflect on my career, I can identify a few of my peers who fall into this category and have made a lasting impression on me. However, while inspirational mentors are certainly important it will be the aspirational mentors who will make you go out of your comfort zone.

• Aspirational mentors

These are the people that are opposite to your personality and leadership qualities. They are the leaders who you strive and aspire to be. They challenge the norm, take risks, are visionaries and attract attention naturally in a room. They challenge you to your full potential. They are the ones who will make you uncomfortable but will encourage you to rise and accelerate your career path. Reflecting on my career, the biggest breaks I got were due to these aspirational mentors who saw what I was capable of and took the fear out of the equation. While I was going out of my comfort zone my inspirational mentors always had my back behind the scenes as the anchor to my ship.

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Mentoring should be personalized for you; your circumstances, your potential, and your ambitions. I have sat through so many management classes where you are part of a group of people, or an audience where you hear life lessons and career advice. However, I have gotten the most value from personalized one-on-one mentor-mentee relationships. Looking back 20 years ago, I will never forget my first official mentor at Estée Lauder who was from the finance department but took the utmost interest in my growth. He helped me build on my weakness and capitalize on my strengths. Per his advice, I enrolled in the Dale Carnegie leadership program, wrote my own promotion letter and changed my networking style- which, ultimately worked wonders for me. He personalized it for me which made all the difference.

Recently, I have mentored several young and experienced professionals from the global cosmetic industry. Their origins included, but were not limited to: the US, Egypt, Iran, Singapore, UK, Canada, India, China. Everyone's situation was unique. Some were still in college and did not know what courses to take in order to pursue cosmetics. Some were in another industry and want to take the leap into cosmetics like I did, but do not know how to go about it. Some wanted to change roles from R&D to Product development or Marketing. Others wanted a career boost by either wanting a promotion or changing jobs, but do not have the network or courage to do so. Lastly, some just wanted to start their own business. In every situation, I found that the best way to mentor them is to understand their background, their needs, their capabilities, and then coach them in the right direction.

Mentors are all around you and in all walks of life – Mentors do not need to only be from the corporate world or the same industry as you are. They can be in your home, can be your best friend, a teacher, a relative, or even a public personality you admire. These are people who you confide in or bounce thoughts off to get their advice or support. Reminiscing on some tough choices that I made in my career, while I had “work” mentors to guide me, the decisions were also backed up by my wife and best friend. There are people in your network outside of work who know you better. They would be best suited to provide you with unbiased guidance if they see and have your best interest at heart. In “real life” we call the aspirational mentors your confidantes and the inspirational mentors are your role models.

I have a magnet on my refrigerator that reads “**Life begins at the end of your comfort zone**”. Indeed, to experience the best value out of a mentor-mentee relationship, you need to first trust yourself, believe in your capabilities to take risks and bring you out of that ring of fear. The role of a mentor is to only show you the path and shine the light, but not to actually dig the road for you.

Very often I get solicitations and calls directly from candidates who send me their résumé and are only interested in getting a job. In these situations, I approach the person stepwise with the first advice being on modifications to their resume and their LinkedIn profile. Then, I ask them a few specific questions.

1. If you had a magic wand how would you create your dream role and what is stopping you from getting there? This question is the most important to understand what their context is, what is going on in their mind, what their vision is, and what efforts they have personally made towards it.

2. How are you liking your current role and what do you see yourself enjoy doing? Is it just the title and salary of your current role that is inspiring you to make a change? Very often there is nothing wrong with the current role they are in and they are perfectly happy. In these situations, I strongly advise them to continue in their current roles but maybe light a little fire to go above and beyond in their position to showcase themselves or accelerate their growth in the company. It is particularly important to know what makes someone happy which will increase their productivity to 100%.

3. What is your talent and what do you do really well? How can you use it given the context? There are situations that I have come across in which talent is truly undervalued in their current position and is triggering disappointment and the need for change. Depending on their situation, it could be a move within their current environment or could initiate a relocation.

4. What have you done to go outside your comfort zone to network, market yourself, meet new people, or increase the visibility in the industry or your current workplace? Getting out of my comfort zone was the biggest leap of faith I took and every time it was a life-changing leap. Whether I took international assignments in Asia, changed departments for bigger roles, or changed companies for better opportunities, all the decisions and efforts were made by me as it was I who wanted the change.

Change is never easy as most of us get used to our comfort zones in personal and work lives. However, change is inevitable and usually works out for everyone's best interest in the long run. Instead, embrace change with positivity and use it to your advantage of learning new experiences and expanding your horizons. Changing jobs or positions does come with its rewards of a higher title or salary but also comes with the stress of adapting to a new environment, making a new network, or disrupting work, life, and family balance. Many are afraid to take the first step due to fear of failure and this is when a mentor can encourage them to show that failure is the only way to succeed.

5. In your biography book who is the hero? What will you do to write the end of your story? The answer to this question is rather tricky but gives an insight into whether they are looking for an aspirational or inspirational mentor and at the same time, it also provides various other clues on how they want to define their legacy and how far they are willing to go to create it. For some, it may take decades to discover their true mission in life but once they do know they will move forward in their chosen leadership roles. The three qualities that bring them closer to the goal are:

