

## Women and Leadership: How to Find a Mentor

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Now that 2011 is well under way, many of us are making and breaking resolutions -- trying to figure out how we can be the best version of ourselves for 2011. The word "reinvention" keeps popping up, especially in conversations with women who want to move into leadership positions in their work. The economic meltdown has eliminated many jobs, ramped up the competition among qualified people and, in general, made it more urgent than ever to find that competitive edge. Both business and government would benefit from more women in leadership positions. Studies show us that profitability improves when women take on positions of leadership in companies. So what tools can best help women move ahead?

### Enter the mentor

A mentor can show you how to ramp up your skill-sets, network effectively and work around or eliminate your weaknesses. They can even open some very important doors to leadership positions.

But how do you find that all-important mentor? Do you stay in your limited circle, hoping your parents, friends or co-workers might "know someone" and put in a good word for you? Or can you yourself have the audacity to reach out to someone you truly respect and admire and ask him or her (in some compelling way) to help you learn, improve and move forward?

In my experience as an entrepreneur, trend-spotter and author of several books (including "[Influence: How Women's Soaring Economic Power will Transform Our World for the Better](#)"), I have had the good fortune to benefit from a number of incredible mentors, who have had great mentors themselves. The main reason they were willing to give me a boost up the ladder of success was simply this: I asked!

Of course, I also did my homework. I learned about their education, their path to success, their past work experience and even the nonprofits to which they contributed their time and/or money. In better understanding their interests, I could make my remarks and questions both respectful and authentic.

### Aim high and don't be intimidated

When searching for a mentor, the first thing you should keep in mind is that no leader is "too important" to be your mentor. Don't put limits on your list of potential mentors by assuming someone is too busy, too high up or too inaccessible. Like the gorgeous model that no one asks

out on a date because they assume she is not interested, often the leaders who are seemingly "too busy" do not get as many requests as you might expect. And they are often the very ones who want the opportunity to give back through helping someone just like you.

Keep in mind that mentoring comes in all sizes, shapes and durations. It doesn't have to take the form of mentoring we often conjure up in our minds, in which we meet with someone for an hour each week, face-to-face. Maybe it's a Skype video conference once a month with someone on the other side of the globe. Or perhaps it's one potent walk-and-talk in the park, tagged onto a business trip or vacation to another city. Mentoring, really, is just learning what you can from someone more experienced and savvy who you admire and respect.

And remember that asking is a gift. I have learned firsthand that the knowledge and acumen that leaders have gained over the years is almost always something they want to share. It helps complete the circle and populate their profession and industry with new blood; it also leaves them feeling like they are making a purposeful contribution to the future of their profession, their company and even the world. In a nutshell, it helps them leave a legacy.

So while it is important to keep an open mind about who could be an excellent mentor, you should also consider these suggestions and tips as you begin your search:

- **Be bold, be gracious.** After you figure out who you'd like to ask to be your mentor and do your due diligence on that individual, you've got to ask them. This can be scary, but you will never get your mentor without asking. Find a way to ask that person that appeals to their ego, intelligence and good will. Help them to know that you understand who they are and how they got to where they are. At the same time, provide them with a feel for who *you* are in a way that might draw them in and want to consider mentoring you.
- **Try different avenues.** Emailing someone is relatively easy today, but a handwritten letter may make you stand out more. Once you know a lot about the person, consider the best method of contact -- email, a letter or even, if appropriate, a direct message on Twitter or Facebook. Also, if you have something thoughtful you can send as a gift (e.g. a book you believe that person might like, a magazine article, etc.) include it as a gesture of respect.
- **If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again.** Like many things in life, you have to reach out to many to find *the one*. If one attempt doesn't work out, don't give up. The most successful professionals in the U.S. have or have had a mentor and many of them did exactly what you are attempting to do -- so they may well want to "pay it forward." Don't let any negative self-talk discourage you and rob you of what could be a rich opportunity to take your career -- and your life -- to the next level.

Remember what the great Virgil said: "Fortune favors the bold." What was true in 29 B.C. is just as relevant today.

Good luck!