

Making it work: How to build a successful mentor relationship

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By Catherine Carlton

PRSA has many options for being a mentor or selecting a mentor who's right for you. But once you find a match, how do you make the relationship work?

It doesn't stop with first contact

After selecting a mentor, schedule a conversation to discuss career paths, questions, advice and support. But it doesn't stop there. An ongoing relationship will continue to add value to both the mentor and the newer practitioner.

"A mentor should always be available," says Sam Giammo, APR, Fellow PRSA, director of public affairs for the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center. "Staying in contact is an important thing, as passing on more than words of wisdom is really done over time."

Maintain contact over the years, miles and jobs, says Mary Beth West, APR, principal, Mary Beth West Consulting, Maryville, Tenn.

"Mentorships should not be nurtured only when the newer professional needs or wants something from the mentor," says West, a co-founder of the New Professional Affinity Group. "Even if you're in a comfortable place careerwise, don't forget to maintain at least periodic contact with your mentor."

Sharing interests, rapport and friendship

Having common experiences and interests is key to building a good mentorship.

"Long-term, enduring mentor relationships – the best kind – tend to grow in a meaningful way when personalities on both sides mesh well," West says. "Truly liking one another's company – even if it's primarily over the phone or via e-mail – represents an important ingredient."

With mentorship comes respect, appreciation

"Mentors don't like having their time wasted or abused, and the less-experienced [practitioners] don't appreciate being 'talked down to' or treated like pests," West says.

Both sides should interact and communicate accordingly, she says.

"Primarily on the side of the newer professional, it's important to demonstrate gratitude to a mentor for what he or she contributes to one's career progression," West says. "Thank-you notes or a token holiday gift go a long way toward solidifying the relationship over time."

It works the other way, too, says Debbie Mason, APR, president, Strategists, Inc., Perry, Fla.

I still remember two letters that two of my mentors wrote me when I was in PRSSA that made all the difference in my career and life," says Mason, a member of PRSA's board of directors. "They cared enough to write, and I cared enough to listen and respond to that advice."

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More than theory makes the difference

Mentors offer two perspectives – theory and the real work of public relations.

"While theory is important, the practical side really makes a difference," Giammo says. "I have taken people to meetings and to press conferences so they don't just get the theory. That is what is going to make the difference."

A mentor is a good starting point when the new professional is assigned something unfamiliar, Mason adds. Mentors help new professionals stretch by giving practical examples and detailed explanations.

Bad news is really the good news

As a mentor, sometimes you recognize potential and take a chance, Giammo says.

"You take an inexperienced person and prepare them for what lies ahead," he says. "The downside is that when you prepare them well enough, you lose them. But overall for the profession that's what you want to do."

"I look at mentorship as making sure there's someone behind us who will be able to do the things we do to keep the profession at the level it is," Giammo says. "It's an important responsibility."

Mason says that mentoring is an ongoing cycle.

"I've tried to instill in those I've mentored the need to be involved, to give and to care deeply about our profession and our fellow professionals," she says. "It's a beautiful thing when those being mentored begin to reach out and mentor others."