

Mapping Her Path

Mentoring Newsletter

6th Edition



The Mentor in the Mirror

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Modern day mentorship can be traced back to Homer's *The Odyssey*. While Odysseus winds his way back to Ithaca after the end of the Trojan War, his son Telemachus faces his own challenges. Telemachus must fend off those seeking to usurp his home and woo his mother. He sets off to find his father who has not yet returned from war. To offer guidance and support during this journey, the goddess Athena appears to Telemachus in the form of an old family friend – Mentor. Few of us can expect to find an actual goddess for a mentor, nor can we expect our mentors to follow us around dispensing wisdom.

Over time, mentorship has come to be regarded as a learning and development partnership grounded in mutual respect and support. Most resources about mentorship remain focused on how to find an external mentor and keep them. But, in my experience, you can, and absolutely should, be mentoring yourself too.

There are many reasons why, and many times in our lives when we might be without a mentor. I've spent much of my career without a formal mentor:

sometimes, I was unsure about what direction I wanted my career to take and it seemed like an imposition to dump my uncertainty on others; other times, I was doggedly looking for a mentor and just didn't find any takers; and still other times, a valued mentoring relationship had simply run its course.

I learned early on that, no matter what I ended up doing with my law degree, I'd have to push myself to envision a space for myself in the legal profession, and that, in turn, the onus is on me to motivate myself to turn possibilities into plans, and thoughts into action. This would be essential for keeping me recharged and inspired in my work wherever I ultimately landed.

This idea of motivating yourself – or taking ownership over your career – is nothing new. It is buried right there in the word mentor. The Greek concept of *menos* is sometimes translated as a form of "heroic strength." But the meaning can be further distilled as mental strength - something that takes place both from without and within, and that is steeped in a meaningful commitment to life-long learning.

What does it mean to mentor yourself?

So, what does it mean to mentor yourself? Whether you aim to mentor yourself, or to become the world's greatest mentee, the starting point is the same. It is essential to understand what you know that you know about yourself, what you don't yet know that you know, what you think you might know about yourself, and what you have yet to discover. Confused? Here are a few ways I think about self-mentorship.

1 Be curious about yourself.

Figure out your personal skills Venn diagram, the sweet spot where you identify the skills you have, that you enjoy using, that you think you use well, and want to improve.

2 Don't believe the hype.

You probably have preconceived ideas about what you think you're good at, or (more likely) what you think you are terrible at. Be willing to interrogate those assumptions and really listen when someone offers constructive feedback.

3 Dream forward and look backward.

Take time to think about where you want to be in the short- and mid-term, but don't forget to look back and appreciate where you've been and what knowledge and experience you have already gained. It can be really challenging in the grind of day-to-day work to remember that there is a bigger picture.

4 Take lifelong learning to the next level.

Get out of your comfort zone. Don't be afraid to fail, or at least don't fear that you won't be excellent. Sometimes we don't bother trying something we expect will take a lot of effort to get truly good at, or that we think we'll be terrible at doing anyway. Don't put more pressure on yourself than you would on any other beginner. You can dip your toe into learning or improving a professional skill. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

5 Ask for help.

Know when you are stuck and need a sounding board, a reality check or just someone to acknowledge the effort you're making. This can be a trusted colleague, a friend in a related field, a partner, or someone who might not be able to commit for long term mentorship, but might be willing to field questions on occasion. Find your people and mentor one another.

That all sounds great, but is this really mentorship? At its core, I'm describing strategies that have helped me get to know myself better and define what success looks like for me in the legal profession. I think this is the hardest part about professional development. Many of us come out of law school without any clear sense of what shape we want our careers to take. But I asked myself *what kind of lawyer do I want to be, and how will I know when I get there?* Through self-mentorship strategies I am getting closer to answering those questions, and I can always bide my time until Athena shows up.

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