
Ten Ways to Become a Great Mentor



By Martin Roll , Business and Brand Strategist, Founder of Martin Roll Company (INSEAD MBA '99D)

A great mentor is able to lead their mentee with empathy, sensitivity and patience, while constantly adapting to changing times and circumstances.

Mentoring is a much used and abused word. Becoming a great mentor is by no means a goal or a destination, but a journey that has a starting point and a constantly changing end point. To be effective at different stages of this journey, a mentor needs to keep his or her mind open, constantly adding value, helping the relationship evolve and playing different roles at different stages.

Mentoring is a “relationship” and a successful relationship is based on an effective two-way model of sharing, commitment and trust. Intel’s founder Andy Grove has commented that whenever he hears the words “mentor” and “mentee”, it makes him nauseous. According to him, successful mentoring is as much “give and take” between the mentor and the mentee as it is about the mentor providing guidance and direction.

The jump from being a good mentor to a great one requires a mentor to become the compass of the relationship and co-create its future path.

There are a few golden rules of achieving greatness in mentoring, which have stood the test of time and are equally relevant and effective today as they were twenty years ago.

Below are ten basic rules which I have developed over the years, and constantly employ in my role as mentor for a variety of global C-suite clients, managers and business school students.

1. Be a complete role model (and not in parts)

A great mentor is a complete role model. You may have been sought after for your professional expertise, for your career success or for your impressive credentials, but when a person takes on the role of a mentor, he or she needs to make an impact beyond professional success.

In addition to the knowledge, expertise, guidance and direction that a mentor is supposed to provide, the overall impact is measured by the quality of communication, empathy, sensitivity, the strength and integrity of character and the ability to inspire.

2. Be empathetic

Putting oneself in the shoes of the mentee is a key aspect of the overall relationship. Effective mentors display empathy at all points in the relationship journey. It is important to constantly understand, evaluate and feel the mentee's situation while providing advice, coaching and guidance. Without this understanding, any form of feedback and guidance may sound disparate, unrealistic and in many instances, impractical.

3. Help in evolving strengths and diluting weaknesses

Mentors do not (and should not) have responsibility for character transformation. Great mentors should enhance personality strengths and find workable solutions for weaknesses.

Mentors are increasingly sought out during critical inflexion points in an individual's professional career, such as changing industries or moving up the ladder. In all such situations, a great mentor uses their skills to sharpen the mentee's strengths to take on such challenges.

4. Listen effectively and deeply

Effective listening is not only a leadership trait but also a key differentiating aspect of a great mentoring relationship. Great mentors are effective, engaged, focused and sensitive listeners. They listen with intent. They listen with purpose. They listen with the intention of assimilation and reflecting. All forms of guidance and direction that are given back are influenced by this strong and patient art of listening.

5. Be open-minded

Just like no situations are alike, no points of discussions, seeking guidance or direction, requests for advice etc, are alike or driven by the same considerations. Hence, a great mentor needs to keep an open mind. The openness should be around thinking afresh if required, tailoring advice and suggestions, helping in strategising and improvising, seeing their past advice and guidance blown to smithereens or simply having the patience to see the impact of bad implementation of good advice.

6. Have great patience

In a mentoring relationship, the importance of patience as a virtue cannot be emphasised enough. Just like any other relationship, there will be moments of frustration, annoyance, miscommunication and lack of understanding. Great mentors will tide over momentary periods of frustration by exercising patience. Equally, the same is expected from the mentee to keep the relationship effective and fruitful.

7. Display commitment

Just like patience, commitment is a virtue that needs to be equally practiced by both the mentor and the mentee. A great mentor can play an invaluable role in shaping the commitment levels of the mentee, in addition to keeping their own commitment levels high. If the mentor believes in the potential, then an important aspect of the relationship is to ensure that commitment levels remain unwavering.

8. Educating and passing on

It is important to understand that no mentors are super humans. They are not expected to know everything or have answers to every possible question. Effective mentors do not let the lack of knowledge and answers

incapacitate them or make the mentoring relationship ineffective. For questions they do not have answers for, they tap into their larger networks, educate themselves and pass on the knowledge to their mentees. In many instances, they will put their mentees in touch with someone who they believe has the right answers for their questions.

9. Be privy to the personal side

Every professional question for guidance and advice comes coupled with a silent personal question. Questions about career transitions come together with doubts on confidence and willpower. Questions about transitioning to senior leadership roles come together with doubts on the ability to lead or having a personality that is not fit to lead. Questions on managing teams come together with doubts on the ability to work effectively with other people.

A broad understanding of the mentee's social, environmental, financial and individual circumstances always helps in providing sound and practical advice.

10. Tailor advice to circumstances

Every piece of advice, guidance and feedback is valuable if tailored to a specific circumstance. Effective mentoring involves providing situation-specific advice as the relationship evolves and the mentee's professional and personal life stage changes. Advice does not need to be timeless but relevant and practical.

Becoming a great mentor is definitely a challenging endeavor. But the bigger the effort and application, the greater the rewards. The joys of witnessing someone succeed and progress in life and the realisation that they have helped in some way for the individual to progress on that path is unparalleled for any great mentor.

***Martin Roll** is a business & brand strategist, and the founder of Martin Roll Company. He provides advisory and guidance on leadership, strategy and execution, and how to build and sustain high performing, enduring brand-driven businesses and global, marketing-oriented organisations. Martin Roll has an MBA from INSEAD ('99D) and is the author of [Asian Brand Strategy](#). You can follow him on Twitter [@MartinRoll](#).*

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About the author(s)

Martin Roll Martin Roll (INSEAD MBA '99D) is a Distinguished Fellow & Entrepreneur in Residence, INSEAD. He is a business and brand strategist, and the founder of Martin Roll Company.