



Stanford eCorner

Build a Composite of Mentors

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Venture capitalist Kate Mitchell encourages entrepreneurs to seek out a wide range of mentors to gain a full picture of individual strengths and weaknesses. Trust is a two-way street when it comes to mentor relationships, says Mitchell, so make it easy for mentors to offer feedback and to tell you "the hard thing."



Transcript

The other thing and I got this early on in banking in particular and then I hung on to it was the thought about mentors. So it's one of the reasons I chose banking was I had the sense of the people I was meeting with that I had people that would be my champions. And how do I think about that? I was listening to City Arts & Lectures where Secretary Rice, I guess she is Condi Rice on campus was interviewing Sheryl Sandberg about Lean In. And they were, as a side part of that whole conversation, they were talking about mentors and I thought - think it was Condi who was saying, yes, I do these talks and afterwards somebody comes up to me and says, will you be my mentor. And she says to them, who are you? What's your name? And I thought, well, that's was revealing, and I've had that happen and you always feel so bad because somebody is really being vulnerable and asking you to do that. And this is how I think of mentors in my career and it's been incredibly useful. First of all, that some of the people who were my mentors don't know they are my mentors, by the way; I don't call them that. I refer to them that now but I didn't say you're my mentor. Number two, they weren't just people who gave me advice. They were people who really believed in my success, they weren't necessarily going to tell me what they thought was important perhaps for them but really what might be best for me.

And they had to earn my trust in that regard first. I had to actually spend time with them to realize he really does care about what I am thinking. He is really listening to what I am saying, he is watching my strengths and weaknesses. That's probably somebody who I want feedback from. And I actually built a composite. If I had a mentor, it was a composite of people. I wanted people who are peers, ultimately now people not only who are senior to me but people who are junior to me who give me advice. I get - I don't want people who are close to what I do and I want people who are further away from what I do because all of those things help me put a good picture around myself that really help me understand what I'm doing well and what I'm not. I think to having champions in your career are really, really important particularly early on but think about that. You know you're earning their trust but you're - they are earning yours too and thinking about putting together this composite mentor idea.

It's incredibly powerful. The other thing about those mentors. And again, you all got here because you got As and you got lots of compliments and you did well and positive reinforcement really works well. The thing that you have to learn early on is make it easy for them to tell you the hard thing. Go to them and start the conversation with. You know, I really want your advice, these are some things I want to do better and I don't think I do well. Open the door. Some of the things they might tell you might be personal habits that you didn't know you've had, twitches. I tend to speak too quickly. I've heard that many times.

I'll probably hear till the day I die. And it's always good advice to get, make it easy for someone to give you feedback. It is incredibly valuable if you really listen to it to get that kind of feedback and take it on board and ask for it repeatedly. It's hugely helpful.