

Eight ways to make **Distance Mentoring** more effective

“My mentor lives in a different city, but we’ve been able to make our relationship work. We both decided this would be a top priority. The other day my mentor sent me an e-mail that contained a link to a great article on business management. I couldn’t believe he took time to do that. It made me feel important, and the link contained some very relevant information to our mentoring goals.”

In the past, most mentors and mentees worked in the same location and met face-to-face. Today, successful mentoring can occur even if the partners are in different cities or time zones.

As in any effective mentoring relationship, the long-distance partners should let a proven process guide their mentoring relationship:

- ❖ Building the relationship
- ❖ Negotiating agreements
- ❖ Developing the mentee
- ❖ Ending the relationship

However, distance mentoring can pose special challenges as mentors and mentees communicate by phone and e-mail.

Here are eight ways to maximize your distant mentoring relationships.

1) Allow time to build the relationship.

At first, your distance mentoring relationship may grow at a slower pace than you’d expect in a face-to-face relationship. Without meeting in person, it can take more effort to get comfortable and build trust during the initial relationship-building phase. Share organizational and personal information (within agreed-upon boundaries), and keep a cheat sheet of your partner’s information handy to refresh your memory whenever you contact each other.

2) Strengthen your commitment.

Avoid falling into the “out of sight, out of mind” trap that can harm long-distance relationships. Consider creating and signing a “contract” that defines your level of commitment, including when, how, and what you’ll communicate with each other. Update the document whenever necessary to help you plan your meetings, keep you on track, and keep the commitment fresh.

3) Plan ahead.

Schedule mentoring meetings in advance. Avoid canceling except for an emergency, and reschedule immediately. Enable the mentee to manage the meetings. This includes sending a proposed agenda in advance, making sure to start and end on time, and summarizing the discussion and agreements before ending the meeting.

4) Listen actively and avoid interruptions.

Since most of your mentoring meetings will be on the phone, pay extra attention to listening actively. Sharpen your sensitivity to subtle changes in tone of voice and pace

of speech — both your mentoring partner's and yours. To avoid misinterpreting each other, frequently check to ensure you're in agreement. Eliminate distractions by turning away from your computer and preventing interruptions from co-workers. During your phone calls, make your mentoring partner the most important person in the world.

5) Communicate frequently between meetings.

Between your phone meetings, exchange e-mails and interesting memos, articles, and Web site addresses.

6) Use technology for better communication.

If your company has the technology, use web cameras and online conference options for "electronic face-to-face meetings." Consider sharing digital photographs of yourselves and your work environments if you have never met each other in person. This can add a personal touch to the relationship. It also may help to have your mentoring partner's photo in front of you during your phone sessions.

7) Try to meet face to face at least once.

Try to hold at least one face-to-face meeting, preferably early in the partnership to build a strong foundation. Look for business reasons to be in the same city, and then schedule a regular mentoring meeting there. If possible, also schedule a social engagement with each other. Even if you just meet at a coffee shop briefly, it can go a long way toward bonding your relationship.

8) Be spontaneous.

Call each other just to check in, say hello, or share some good news. E-mail is a great way to keep in touch. Forwarding information relevant to the partnership keeps the relationship alive between scheduled meetings. In the quote at the beginning of this article, note how good the mentor's e-mail correspondence made the mentee feel.

Conclusion

Distance mentoring has proven effective in today's business environment, where companies may have offices across the country or around the globe. Even if you and your mentoring partner work in the same location now, one of you might take frequent business trips or move to another location. Instead of skipping your mentoring meetings or ending your relationship, use these distance-mentoring tips, and make the arrangement work well for you. Good luck!