

Mentor a young Professional—pay your time, talent, and experiences forward

Author – Michael J. Lee, President – MJ Lee Technical Insight LLC

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Introduction



As an experienced and accomplished professional, you have insights and lessons that you have learned. You have a history of support and guidance that you have received that have shaped you. Young students and young professionals can struggle to navigate the process of finding an internship, their first job, or even to understand the intricacies of their chosen profession. The many communication and information sharing tools available in today's Industry, Corporate, and Career ecosystems flood young people with information. Job applications are often blind submissions to a website. But it all can lack a human element.

This article is written for prospective Mentors. Becoming a Mentor to a young Technical Professional can help them to make sense of these things and provide a beacon of clarity and confidence to them. It can provide a personal impact that can change the trajectory of someone's career and their life. It is a sometimes daunting and stressful endeavor. It takes effort, initiative, and passion on your part, but can yield huge rewards to both you and your Mentee.

This article is an effort to share some fundamental guidelines on how and where to start, how to do it, and some process suggestions as well.

Basic Definitions

Mentor – an experienced professional that supports, enables, and empowers a younger student or professional in a similar career or industry. The support can come in the way of advice, coaching, networking, career development.

Mentee – A student or young professional that has the opportunity to benefit from a Mentor

Network – professional connections from either shared experiences, backgrounds, titles, or industries. These people can be somewhat distant acquaintances, or very close professional colleagues at the same company or industry.

Networking – the act of leveraging a network for strategic professional and personal gain. Networking is often one of the most misunderstood and underutilized tools in a person's professional life.



How do you Mentor and Network?

A Mentor's role is to listen, advise, suggest, enable, and empower a Mentee. It is not to find a job or choose a career for the mentee. The mentee must have the primary responsibility to define and own their career path and career based on their own passions and values. The mentor can provide a wise and mature perspective to guide them to develop their vision and how it can connect to a career or job.

It is important to first establish a relationship and a rapport.

You are likely part of the same organization, company, or university as your Mentee – so there is already some common ground. The game-changer though, for a mentor, is to share “your story” with your Mentee, including your missteps in your academic and professional career, and how you turned it into an inflection point, and launch pad for future success, and can be a game changer for Mentees. The thought of hearing a “successful person” like yourself, sharing past challenges or failures, that the mentee can relate to, is very impactful for a young person.

Some tips for success –

- Important to find common ground and develop a rapport before jumping into advice.
- Keep your eyes/ears open for what resonates with your mentee, and what their core values are.
- Tailor your message to your mentee – the relationship should have an organic and dynamic element to it. There is no script for mentoring. Each relationship is completely unique.
- Listen with empathy, and an open mind. Keep in mind that your mentee has personal events and stresses in their life related to academic deadlines, family events, that you may not know about. Also consider what may be affecting their responses to your suggestions.
- When you hear your Mentee share something, try to relate something similar in your experience, to build your rapport and collaboration. Young people can benefit from the experience of interacting with an experienced professional to learn that they are people with concerns/fears/uncertainty also
- Be mindful of Micro-aggressions – and other unintended communication sensitivities.

My formula for initiating a Mentoring relationship –

- 1) Do an initial 30 minute meeting to introduce yourself (go first to set the tone, show your humanness, and how things haven't always been perfect in your career and life- be an example for the introduction to make the student relaxed) and then let the student do their own introduction. Don't go too long on the first meeting – it's an icebreaker.
- 2) Ask how the student thinks that you can help – let them lead the direction of the dialogue or let them express their thoughts.
- 3) As an icebreaker, offer to help them to develop their resume (3 loop process)
- 4) Offer to help them articulate their career or professional vision, or a 1, 3, 5 year career plan.

- 5) Ask them if there are current academic projects or interactions that they are struggling with and would like to bounce off of you in the next meeting.
- 6) Establish with your Mentee how important this relationship is to you, and how important it should be for them. They are likely very focused on their academic coursework, or their daily job. While those things are surely important, you should convince them that focusing on the “long game” and refining their goals and ambitions is even more important, and that only they can define those things.

During meetings, take notes, so that you can keep track of the key points of the discussion, and jot down some brainstorm ideas about how to help the mentee. These notes will be helpful to refer back to in future meetings.

Set up the second meeting and a proposed frequency of meetings. The Mentee should be the one to schedule this, and arrange logistics, as an important role in the relationship.



Logistics and mechanics for Meetings

Face to face vs. virtual vs. phone call. Bottom line – whatever works is best, but from my experience – in person is best, but isn’t always practical. Virtual, may provide more flexibility, while still enabling a more human connection. A phone call may provide the most scheduling flexibility. Do what works.

Impactful projects to work on with your Mentee (suggestions) –

- Develop a Career Goal Vision Statement – several sentences or a paragraph. Quality over quantity is important. It should be specific about desired industry to work in and why, the type of role desired, and passions and priorities that drive these goals. This is a “living” document and can evolve and change as the Mentee learns more about their industry, and as their vision matures. The Mentor shouldn’t draft or drive it, but guide it with thoughtful questions and challenges.
- Review the Mentee’s Resume – sharpen it with a focus on securing interviews.
- Develop a 1, 3, 5 year Career Plan. It should be based on the Mentee’s Career Goal Vision Statement. The Mentor can help the Mentee to develop building blocks aimed at achieving the goals – i.e. – a graduate degree, a specific outside activity – SAE Project, or Engineering Society membership, or rotation to another job in their organization to gain experience. A Mentor can help to calibrate the plan by encouraging a more aggressive plan or less aggressive plan based on their Mentee’s preparedness.
- Strongly encourage the Mentee to communicate the Career Goal Vision Statement and Career Plan with their direct Manager to obtain feedback and drive dialogue to calibrate the discussion and goals with

“reality on the ground” in their organization. This may be a positive or negative discussion but is important.

- Support near term Job Search efforts, or even conduct a mock interview to help them prepare.
- Introduce the Mentee to colleagues with similar goals or visions to collaborate with and grow their network. A Mentor should never try to do it all, and should be mindful of their “lane” and what their own limitations may be, relative to helping their Mentee.

Definition of Success - Published data and my own experience in formal Mentoring Programs is clear and compelling – there is a 40% success rate of Mentoring relationships. (Insert Citation) This can be an alarming reality. Some organizations drawing Mentors and Mentees with common backgrounds may have much higher success rates. With a 40% success rate, however, don’t be discouraged - my point of view is that if you can help one person even a bit, you are making a huge difference. I have not found any concrete metrics, objective measurements, or KPI’s to measure success in this space. The best feedback is sometimes, a “thank you” or even hearing second hand about a young person landing a Summer Internship or seeing their updated resume on LinkedIn. That must be enough sometimes. However, I have also received handwritten notes, and been told by parents or colleagues about the gratitude that a mentee has expressed. My commitment to help comes from a passion to help and pay back the support and guidance that I was provided. You must decide for yourself what drives you to do what you do.

One comment on time commitment and being “present” during the meetings – 2-3 hours per month is a realistic commitment level. Sometimes less, sometimes, when getting started, or working through a specific event or project with your Mentee, it may be more. Don’t be intimidated, or shy away from Mentoring due to time commitment. Also, be very mindful of the fact that your Mentee may see your frequent cancellations or rescheduling, or quick answers, without fully listening or being distracted, as a statement that being a Mentor is an inconvenience or imposition. This perception can also impact the rapport and connection that you have. Take your time, listen, be present, and enjoy the time with your Mentee. Learn from them and use the opportunity to reflect on your career journey and be a better Mentor.

Best Mentor/Mentee matches – I have found that valuable interaction can result between any 2 people. However, more common ground, common background, etc., is clearly better. Females can often be better mentors to female mentees, and people from similar backgrounds (first generation college students, Hispanics, etc.) can be better mentors. But this is not an absolute requirement.

Mentors can also often benefit tremendously from their relationship with their mentees. This can be enhanced when there are clear differences in age, background, race, etc. I have had Mentees do a tutorial for me on Bitcoin and a Phone App (TimeTree) to help me with my busy, dynamic calendar. The Mentees offered this, to try to pay back my effort, based on things that we had discussed during our meetings. These have been game-changers for me that I wouldn’t have experienced or benefitted from without my Mentee’s initiative.

Don’t try to do it all yourself. As a Mentor, if you don’t know how to connect the student to a job, or provide relevant advice, leverage your network to find someone who can. It is rare when as a Mentor, you can provide a full set of insight, internships, and job support to a Student. However, by leveraging your own network, you can do it. That is the power and importance of Networking.

Networking

I did not fully grasp the benefit of networking until after I retired, and while starting my consulting business. Establishing Mentoring Programs highlighted how little skilled and seasoned professionals know about Networking. Young people do not understand the power of networking, and neither do most experienced professionals.

- “Network of Acquaintances” - The best networking help doesn’t always come from a very close friend or professional colleague; it is most often from an acquaintance – this should be shared with the student – to empower them to reach out and develop and leverage their own network of acquaintances.
- A network is built on shared experiences, shared employers, shared city of birth, or something as simple as being a “female in automotive”. The most effective connections are often built upon something stronger – a common organization, or common scholarship program. Often these relationships are “can’t lose”.
- Teach your mentee how to network and build a network – Do creative searches on LinkedIn. Work together on how best to network for their benefit and goals.

Wrap-up

Hopefully, this article will help you to get started. From personal experience, I can guarantee that Mentoring will be rewarding and fulfilling for you. There are challenges, but you cannot underestimate the positive impact that you can have on a student or young professional by taking time to help them understand and define their goals, and then provide some perspective for them on how to approach things.

Thanks for reading. This article is intended as an introductory article, and the first of a series about Mentoring and Networking. Stay tuned for more. Now go help the next generation of young professionals!

About the Author –

Michael Lee is a retired Automotive Engineering Executive with 35+ years of experience in the industry, including at Ford Motor Company in Body Structures and Closures Systems Engineering, where he managed and launched many large scale projects and led large global technical teams. During his career, he participated in many formal and informal Mentoring Programs and relationships as a Mentor and Mentee. He now operates a Consulting Business with a few select clients, where he provides strategic insight and support to start-ups, Tier 1 Suppliers, and companies seeking to innovate or grow. He has also initiated several formal Mentoring Programs at organizations like the Evans Scholars Foundation, the University of Detroit Mercy College of Engineering, as well as at a large Tier 1 Automotive Supplier, and a large Clean Energy Company.

He can be contacted at

mjlee@hotmail.com

[Mike Lee LinkedIn Profile](#)