

SHORTCUT 10: Find a Mentor, or Three

Geo Concepcion grew up in a rough, low-income neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. Even though he never got to know his father and money was always tight, Geo thinks he was pretty lucky. His mom had a great set of values that included a belief that nothing was more important than education. She even moved Geo into the best public school she could find when his first grade teacher told her that Geo wasn't being challenged.

But it wasn't until Geo reached middle school that he began to understand the hardships of the world he lived in and to sense his own primal cues. He wanted to get out from under the burden of poverty. Life at this age revolved around baseball for Geo, but his family couldn't afford to replace his worn-out mitt. More humiliating were the times when Geo had to impose on his friends to ask for help meeting basic daily needs. Having decided that he was going to create a better life for himself, and with help from his mom, Geo launched his Prosperity Cycle by deciding to earn the grades in middle school that would put him on the path toward

the Whitney Young Magnet High School, one of the best public college preparatory high schools in the area.

And that's when things got interesting.

After a year or so in his new high school, Geo resolved to learn more about finance and signed up for his high school's accounting class. As part of the accounting class, a Junior Achievement volunteer, Geoff Smart, came in and taught a ten-week class on entrepreneurship. You may have heard of Geoff. He's the bestselling author of *Who* and *Leadocracy*, and CEO of ghSMART, a leadership consulting company. In a classroom full of students, Geoff couldn't help but notice Geo. His enthusiasm for the course was over the top. Geo was fascinated by the lectures and would hang out after class and talk to Geoff about potential careers. Geo said he "would pepper Geoff with questions and probably was quite a nuisance." From Geoff's perspective, Geo came off as enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and intelligent. In Geo's words, "Geoff gave me the resources to think about a much more demanding career path than I would have pursued otherwise."

This would be the start of a powerful mentoring relationship for Geo.

By the end of the ten-week course, Geo had let Geoff know about his goal to someday work on Wall Street. In return, Geoff offered Geo his contact information and invited him to keep in touch periodically if he wanted to. As Geoff described it, "I wasn't going to chase this kid, but if he wanted to take the initiative to call me, I've always got time to let a student pick my brain. It was very much up to him. And to his credit he has followed up ever since."

A mentor can offer you many things, but a critical component is that he will break news that you might not want to hear. When Geo shared his goal of going to work for a leading Wall Street

firm, Geoff told him that he needed to aim for a 4.0 in college. Geo had been more of a B student in high school yet still leveraged his hard work and ambition into a full-ride scholarship to DePaul University. When Geoff delivered his dose of reality, Geo demonstrated his commitment by taking his effort to a new level, earning a 3.97 by the time he graduated from DePaul.

Again, Geo found that his effort paid off. Geoff called it one of the proudest days of his life when Geo called him to say that he had earned not one but four offers from top-tier financial firms. Geo had just achieved the goal that had motivated him for the last six years.

Geoff finds it incredibly satisfying, in a mentoring relationship or otherwise, “to work with someone who acts on my counsel and achieves more because of it.” And with Geo in particular, he found his chats were fun, useful, and low hassle—because Geo made them that way. Geo understood that Geoff was a very busy guy and made sure he didn’t waste his time. He checked in only a few times a year and only when he needed insight on a big decision or opportunity.

Today, Geo Concepcion is a trader for a financial firm that manages over \$6.5 billion in investments. At age twenty-five he is just now becoming conscious of how and when he entered the Prosperity Cycle. Until recently, his journey from disadvantaged kid to trader seemed to him like a series of lucky or random events that culminated in his current job. But now that he is involved in coaching other young people, he’s realizing that his path wasn’t random at all. But it was always clear to him how important mentoring was to his success. “I look at the people that I get to work with and the different experience that I’ve had and it’s very, very cool. Without Geoff’s mentorship, there’s no way I would have

achieved my goal of working for a top Wall Street firm, much less landed my current job.”

Why You Need a Mentor

There’s working hard and there’s working smart. Working smart requires you to learn from the best, but mentoring takes that idea a step further. Instead of learning from people who are a bit more knowledgeable than you or may be on the same path, mentoring offers you an opportunity to learn from someone who has successfully achieved what you want to achieve and has the experience and wisdom to offer sound, valid, and possibly life-changing guidance and opportunities.

The mountain that you are about to climb can look intimidating from the bottom. Getting advice from someone who has climbed it before can give you the confidence that it can be done, that you can do it. Whether your vision is to become a leader within a large corporation or the chief executive of your own start-up, one of the toughest hurdles you will face is the need to believe you can actually do it. Most of us sell ourselves short and don’t aim high enough. An experienced mentor can take the pie-in-the-sky vision that you are hesitant to even say out loud and, through experience and personal example, lead you to the point where you can see yourself making it happen.

But a mentor can offer much more than inspiration: A mentor can open your eyes to possibilities that you didn’t even know existed—opportunities that might fit your desires and abilities better than anything you had considered. A mentor can put the right tool in your hand at the right time. The right mentor can allow you to take action—the right action—before you run out of time,

money, energy, or inspiration or before somebody else beats you to the punch. A mentor can open doors for you that would be difficult, if not impossible, for you to open yourself. People are out there just waiting to employ you, invest in you, promote you, and believe in you. They just don't know it yet. The right mentor can help.

More than giving you advice on how to solve an immediate problem, a mentor can advise you on what prosperity even means to you. Before you set off for a distant destination, it pays to think through whether you really want to go there. It's never too early to work with a mentor—even while you are sorting out your personal vision. Taking the wrong path can delay your journey to prosperity interminably. A mentor can keep you from going down any number of dead ends and keep you on the shortest path to prosperity.

A mentor is a great person to turn to when you face a decision that has fundamental implications for the prosperous life you envision. For smaller decisions that are issue specific and require someone with a particular experience or knowledge base, you might turn instead to a more readily available resource—someone who may not know you as well but has the experience to provide valuable guidance for the issue at hand.

In America, historically there has been a focus on self-reliance, and that's not a bad thing. Ultimately, it is up to each of us to make things happen in our lives. But we shouldn't get caught up in a mindset that says we always have to do everything on our own. We don't. It's okay to ask for help.

Sometimes a Guide Is All You Need

Geoff isn't the only mentor that Geo has had. Before Geoff, Geo looked to a baseball coach and a teacher for guidance, and after

landing his first job in finance, Geo looked to a small number of more experienced colleagues to guide him. In fact, *guide* may be a better word than *mentor* for people who can provide you with direction within a narrowly defined field or for a brief period of time.

It is no secret that as the world has gotten more complex, the professionals who thrive within it have gotten more specialized. A generation ago, a mentor for a young person in banking could have provided advice on almost any subject that came up. Today, if a similar young person is trying to figure out which potential employer's hedge fund strategy is a better fit for his strengths, he had better have an adviser who understands the subtle differences. A guide is someone who has the experience you need to make the right decision and doesn't necessarily need to know you as well as a mentor in order to add value. By engaging the expert, you can save precious time with your mentor for big-picture questions while getting better advice from someone who finds it easy to provide it.

More guide candidates are available to you than there are mentors, those who have taken the time to understand you and your unique path to prosperity. The power of social networking is that you can build a network of potential guides, people you may need to turn to when you hit a road block for a bit of very targeted advice. Utilizing a guide relationship opens up more resources to you and is more likely to be a netgiving opportunity—a chance for a two-way exchange of help. That said, the difference between a guide and a mentor is subtle. More often a guide is somebody who is not a peer, who isn't on the path alongside you but who has been where you need to go and can help you understand the twists and turns in the path directly ahead of you.

What Makes a Good Mentor?

Whether you are in high school or are a mid-career professional, you should be looking for the same fundamentals in your mentoring relationships. The best are marked by a respectful, curious, and self-starting mentee and a mentor who is experienced and successful, has a win-win personality, and enjoys enabling the success of someone traveling a similar career path.

Most effective mentorships occur between two people who have invested time in the process of coming to know, respect, and care about each other. Why? It's difficult to be a good mentor to someone you haven't taken the time to get to know. You have to care enough to dedicate precious time to mentoring activities, and that won't happen until you have come to know and respect your mentee. From the mentee's perspective, it takes time before you feel comfortable entrusting your hopes and dreams to someone you haven't already come to know and respect. That's why the most natural mentorships aren't arranged marriages but are relationships that begin as something else and evolve into a mentorship over time.

Prime candidates for mentors are current or former bosses, teachers, or family friends. Mentorships like these are extremely powerful. Mentors have the opportunity to combine their personal relationships with a mentee with a core competence in their area of interest. They build on an existing foundation of mutual respect and, from there, forge ahead into the fun stuff—the discussion of what the mentee wants to achieve and the shortest path to realizing it, based on the mentor's experience.

If you are fortunate enough to know someone like this, you're already a step ahead. It's more likely, however, that you don't have

a close relationship with somebody who has already achieved many of the things you would like to achieve. So you have to go find a mentor with a proven track record of success who is willing to take the time to understand your aspirations and, through expert guidance, increase your odds of achieving them.

To help you assess mentor candidates, use the attributes shown here.

Attributes of a Great Mentor

Someone who:

- Has achieved success and has deep experience in your area of focus.
- Cares about you and your development. This interest could be motivated by a familial bond, friendship, professional relationship, or simply the great feeling generated by helping another person succeed.
- Is accessible. Meetings don't need to be face-to-face. The deeper the relationship, the more possible it is to tackle tough subjects on the phone, Skype, or over e-mail.
- Listens well. Think twice before choosing a mentor who enjoys hearing himself talk more than understanding your perspective.
- Gives advice, not directives. A good mentor is there to leverage his or her experience and contacts to help you achieve your goals, not to tell you what to do.
- Has demonstrated the high level of confidentiality essential to frank discussions and personal exploration.
- Exhibits traits that you would like to emulate. Whether your mentor is ethical and gracious or shady and pompous, over time you will begin to emulate that behavior.

As you think about potential mentors in your life, assess their relative strengths and weaknesses. Some will have more experience in your area of interest, while others may offer a better personal connection. Refer to the exercises at the end of this shortcut to help you consider candidates.

I've been lucky enough to have a number of important mentors in my life. The most important was my father. I could confide anything to him without fear of being judged or looking foolish; having the confidence to ask "dumb" questions is key. He had experience with businesses of all shapes and sizes, and he was a numbers guy. He grilled me for business plans and financial projections, and those projections killed a lot of ideas that sounded pretty good in my head but would have led me down a disastrous path. I had no doubt that he had my best interests at heart. While he wasn't an entrepreneur, he believed that it was the surest path to the prosperity I wanted. And he told me the single most valuable piece of advice that anyone has ever given me: It didn't matter much where I started my entrepreneurial journey. He was confident that over time I would be able to direct my path toward what I wanted. The important part was to get in the game. He gave me the confidence to pull the trigger.

But I developed another mentoring relationship through pure chutzpah. When I knew that I wanted to explore an entrepreneurial path, I started talking to anyone I knew who I thought could tell me about starting or operating a small company. The problem was that I didn't know that many people with relevant experience. So I would chat up anyone I came into contact with about the subject, including complete strangers. One evening I was returning to Denver from a business trip and found myself sitting with the only other passenger on an airport shuttle bus. Small talk led us to discover that we both lived in Fort Collins and that my fellow traveler, Fred Gardner, was the president of a commercial sign company, Gardner Signs. In the ten minutes or so we had together, I managed to convey an interest in his company and a desire to

learn more about his story. We exchanged business cards. I'm sure he thought he'd never hear from me again.

He was wrong. Within a week I followed up with a phone call, and after another pleasant conversation, I asked if he and his wife would like to join my wife and me for dinner at our home. In retrospect, I can't believe I did that. Neither could his wife, Denise. She later admitted that she was sure that they were in for an evening of Amway sales; I think they had a side bet on it. In any case, we had a great evening. I learned a ton from Fred's story of becoming the president of his own company. In subsequent conversations, Fred educated me on the good and the bad of small business ownership and was the first one to recommend an organization called Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), an organization that ended up being a lifesaver by supplying a global pool of peers who were doing what I was doing and could suggest solutions to the myriad problems that I would encounter over the next ten years.

Twenty years later, Fred and Denise are still our dear friends. And I would not have known him if I had not been willing to get out of my comfort zone and chat up a stranger. Just as you are surrounded by great business opportunities, you are also surrounded by incredible resources on a daily basis. Think about this the next time you are getting coffee, working out, sitting on an airplane, or eating alone. In fact, take Keith Ferrazzi's advice and *Never Eat Alone*.

Earn the Right to Be Mentored

A cautionary note: A great mentor is not a crutch, will not do your work for you, and won't turn you on to an opportunity that you don't deserve. Advice from a mentor can be invaluable, and

all that most mentors want in return is a word of thanks and the ability to take pride in an accomplishment that their experience helped support. But, like almost every other recommendation in this book, getting the full benefit of a mentorship is a lot of work.

The world we live in is a complex place, and when you finally figure out how a piece of it works, you want to shout it out loud. That is how a mentor thinks. It's even better when a hard-working young person shows an interest in hearing you explain it—especially if the listener goes on to leverage your advice into a remarkable achievement and you can say you helped him or her do it. So, if you have any doubts about your willingness to follow the advice of a mentor or in your ability or motivation to do the work required, please do the mentors of the world a big favor and don't approach them in the first place. They may put their reputations on the line by recommending you or offering you an opportunity. You had better be ready to deliver.

If you are able to find the right mentor and commit yourself to acting on his or her advice, don't forget to say thank you. It's the primary compensation the mentor is looking for. The best way to do this is by repeating the advice that a mentor gave you, showing how you put it to work, and sharing the great results you achieved because of it.

And when you do achieve the prosperity you've been striving for, pay it forward and become a mentor to somebody who has a lot to learn from you.

Finding the Shortcut

- Long-term relationships yield the most productive guides. Think about friends, family, and colleagues who have an

interesting experience or background that you have not yet had the opportunity to explore. Next, expand your thinking to groups that are organized to bring people together in your area of interest. Research existing user groups, technical associations, and conferences.

- You would be surprised at the incredible resources that you come in contact with randomly or as a normal course of business. Challenge yourself to get out of your comfort zone and talk more with those around you, ask questions, and learn about them and their backgrounds. Connect with them on LinkedIn or another social network.
- All organizations need volunteers to advance the group's mission. What organizations could you help with research, outreach, or organization in order to forge valuable relationships?

Do Something

- Start networking with a purpose. Adding huge numbers to your LinkedIn Network has value, but not nearly as much as creating groups of a smaller number of high-value contacts where you can note the specific skills, experience, or connections that you may want to access later. In LinkedIn, you can use tags to group contacts in a variety of ways and then quickly access them when you need them.
- Brainstorm a list of family, friends, colleagues, bosses, former professors, and business leaders that you have come to know. Rate each on a scale of 1 to 5 for each of the following:
 - Level of success in their profession
 - Alignment of their profession with your passion

- How closely their values align with yours
- Your estimate of their interest in helping you or someone like you
- Sort your list by the sum of the scores to give you a prioritized list of guides for your journey. When you face a new challenge, go here first.
- Whenever you approach a contact or someone on your list for help, use an approach that shows respect, gratitude, and a desire to support their initiatives if it is within your ability to do so.