LOW HANGING MENTORSHIP

Markus Westergren

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INTRO

Even the most seasoned professionals can benefit from the guidance and expertise of a mentor. In fact, harnessing the wisdom of a mentor can be a powerful tool for accelerating your growth and development in the field.

If you answer yes to any of the following questions, this book is for you!

- Do you want to present a talk at a conference
- Do you want to become a Java champion?
- Do you want to become an architect?
- Do you want to mentor junior developers?
- Do you want to build your product?
- Do you want to start your own company?
- Do you want to contribute to open-source or community projects?
- Do you want a higher salary?

I wanted some of these things myself. What do we have to do, and where do we start to achieve them?

I will tell you how to achieve goals like this by finding a mentor and harnessing their expertise.

There's so much we can achieve on our own, but the road to success is often paved with the guidance of a wise mentor. I've experienced firsthand what impact having a mentor can have.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Markus Westergren is a Java Principal Consultant working on large educational projects.

Markus Westergren is a staff engineer with over 20 years of experience. During his work with large backend projects, Markus has repeatedly seen the big impact code quality has on the outcome of the projects and the careers of the developers working on them. Because of that, Markus focuses on helping professional Java back-end developers write maintainable code so that they become sought-after experts in the software development industry.

MY STORY

I have been working professionally as a software developer for over 20 years. In the last few years, I have felt there should be a way to improve my career without becoming a manager. I tried working as a consultancy manager but did not like it. It was not what I wanted to do. I have always enjoyed learning. It was encouraged by my employer because I'm working as a consultant. I did courses with some of the top names in the business and attended conferences. I was still stuck as a senior developer and could not see a way forward. I could not see the why in what I was doing.

I was overwhelmed with all the new technologies and did not know how I should be able to keep up. Without realizing it, my stress level was building.
In the spring of 2021, I started to experience physical symptoms. I got irritated at even the tiniest problem. I lost weight and had trouble sleeping. My hands started shaking. It got so bad that I sometimes couldn't type on the keyboard. My wife was worried and tried to make me see a doctor. I did not listen and hoped it would go away by itself. It didn't.

It's now May of the same year. I got a really high fever that kept getting higher, so I finally went to see a doctor.

COVID was still very much a factor, so that was what they first assumed I had. I got lucky because the doctor ordered more lab work than usual for someone with my symptoms. I went home to await the results of the tests.

The next day, the doctor called and said, You must go to the hospital now!
At the ER I got lots of questions if I smoked or used to smoke. It turned out that I had an autoimmune disorder that is quite rare, especially in men. This disorder often is triggered by smoking, pregnancy, or stress. I was obviously not pregnant and did not look stressed, so they assumed that I smoked. I ended up being admitted for five days while the medicine started working.

Fast forward to October the following year, 2022. Our company is going to Oracle Cloud One in Las Vegas. I attended a session about growing beyond senior developer presented by Bruno from Brazil. He had a big Brazilian flag as a cape. You might know who it is. He said things that resonated with me, so I did something I never have done before. I talked to him after the session. For me, a speaker was unapproachable and should not have to deal with a lowly developer like me. It turned out to be completely wrong. He was a nice guy who was happy to talk to me. He became my mentor and friend. One year after meeting my mentor for the first time, I had the opportunity to give a presentation at Devoxx Belgium.

I wish I had gotten a mentor earlier. I want to share my experience and what I learned in the hope that it can help those of you who might be in the same situation that I was.

Let's start by looking at the origin of the word mentor and what it means.

HISTORY OF MENTOR

The story of Mentor comes from Homer's The Odyssey. Odysseus fights in the Trojan War and entrusts the care of his household to Mentor, who serves as a teacher and overseer of Odyssey's son, Telemachus. You might think that Mentor did such a great job, and that's where the word comes from. You will be partly right. Mentor failed. The household fell into disarray.

It takes the goddess Athena (also called Minerva), who disguises herself as Mentor, to get Telemachus on track, goad him to action, and find his father.

So a woman had to step in and clean up the mess that the man created ... just saying.

The word mentor evolved to mean trusted advisor, friend, teacher, and wise person. History offers many examples of helpful mentoring relationships: Socrates and Plato, Hayden and Beethoven, Freud and Jung. Mentoring is a fundamental form of human development where one person invests time, energy, and personal know-how in assisting the growth and ability of another person.

mentor: a trusted counselor or guide

mentee: one who is being mentored

"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

-Isaac Newton

"A mentor is someone who allows you to see the hope inside yourself."

-Oprah Winfrey

MENTORS FOR SENIOR DEVELOPERS

As a senior developer, it can be easy to fall into a comfort zone, relying solely on your own knowledge and expertise to tackle any challenge that comes your way. However, successful individuals in this field understand the value of continuous growth and the invaluable role that mentors can play in their professional development.

Being able to harness the expertise of a mentor is a skill that can tremendously enhance your career trajectory as a senior developer. They can provide fresh perspectives and insights. Allow you to tap into their experience and wisdom.

In this book, we will explore the art of harnessing your mentor's expertise as a senior developer, diving into ways this collaborative relationship can empower your growth in the industry. From identifying the right mentor to establishing effective communication channels and extracting maximum knowledge from the mentorship, we will uncover the key strategies that will transform your professional journey.

Throughout this book, we will also shed light on the common challenges that senior developers may face when seeking mentorship, such as the hesitance to ask for help or the fear of appearing incompetent. We will address these concerns head-on, providing actionable tips on overcoming these hurdles and building a good relationship that breeds success.

Additionally, we will show the importance of paying it forward. It's equally valuable to receive guidance as it is to provide support for junior developers who can benefit from your expertise. By actively participating in mentorship circles, you will solidify your own knowledge and contribute to the growth of the broader developer community.

Many companies have mentorship programs for junior developers. It's less common to have them for senior developers. It can be hard to find a mentor internally if you are the most senior developer in your company. In some cases, it's possible to use a reverse mentorship, where a more junior developer mentors a senior developer on a specific topic.
In recent years, there has been a growing presence of technical leadership roles like staff and principal engineers. Individuals in these positions are well-suited to serve as mentors for senior developers.

Career advice, training, blogs, and YouTube videos can only get you so far. The technical landscape is changing rapidly, especially with the recent boom in AI. To stay relevant in the fast-changing field, we must be willing to change with it. A senior developer needs soft skills to grow. Soft skills are essential if you are aiming for the beyond senior developer positions such as architect, staff, and principal engineer. A mentor can guide you through the learning process and make it more effective. Don't limit yourself to only looking for a mentor within the software industry. Depending on your goals, a mentor from another field might fit you better.

The distinction between formal and informal mentorship lies primarily in the structure, arrangement, and level of organization of the mentorship relationship. Here's an explanation of each:

TYPES OF MENTORS

Sponsor/advocate uses their influence/position to create opportunities for you.

Coach analyzes where you are now and suggests where to go next. A coach can help you even if they are not a subject-matter expert. Coach is a more defined role. There are even certifications for coaches.

Mentor helps mentees with advice for specific problems based on their experiences. A mentor will guide and suggest actions for the mentee.

INFORMAL MENTORING

It's likely that you already have mentors you may not even be aware of. Is there someone you follow on social media or read their blog? Have you tried to comment or give feedback on their content?

Content creators want their readers to engage with them. Try sending a question to someone you are inspired by, and I'm sure that you will get a reply. If you see them at a conference, make sure that you take the opportunity to talk to them in person. Let me tell you a secret. They want to talk to you. That's why they are going to conferences. All you have to do is to go up and introduce yourself.

These are informal mentors and a mentorship with them grows in the same way as a friendship. You don't go up to a stranger and ask them if they want to be your friend. Start by engaging in content from someone you respect and want to learn from and build a relationship that way.

1. Naturally Emerging: Informal mentorship is more spontaneous and develops naturally over time, based on mutual respect, shared interests, and a willingness to help and learn.
2. No Set Structure: Informal mentorship lacks the formal structure of organized mentorship programs. The base of the relationship. is the willingness to engage without predetermined guidelines.
3. Flexibility: Informal mentorship relationships tend to be more flexible. The mentorship might focus on mixed topics, and there may not be strict goals or objectives. The relationship adapts to the needs and interests of both parties.
4. No Time Limit: Informal mentorship can last as long as both parties find it beneficial. There's no predetermined time limit, and the relationship can evolve naturally.
5. Personal Connection: Informal mentorship often develops from a personal connection between the mentor and mentee. It might be a senior colleague offering guidance to a junior colleague, a friend providing career advice, or a respected professional in the industry sharing insights.

FORMAL MENTORING

A formal mentor is a structured and organized mentorship relationship. Usually, you have to pay for such a mentor.

1. Structured Arrangement: In formal mentorship, there's usually a structured arrangement with clearly defined roles, expectations, and objectives. The mentorship relationship has a specific purpose in mind.
2. Organized Matching: They often involve a matching process, which matches mentors and mentees based on specific criteria such as skills, goals, or industry interests. The goal is to find a good fit between mentor and mentee.
3. Goal-Oriented: Formal mentorship typically has well-defined goals. These goals could be related to skill development, career advancement, leadership, or other specific areas. The mentor and mentee work together to achieve these objectives.
4. Time Commitment: Formal mentorship arrangements often have a defined time commitment. There may be a set duration for the mentorship, such as a few months or a year. Regular meetings or check-ins may be scheduled.
5. Organizational Support: Many formal mentorship programs are initiated and supported by organizations, whether it's a company, professional association, or educational institution. These entities facilitate the mentorship process, provide resources, and monitor progress.

Both types of mentorship have their merits, and the choice of which to pursue depends on your goals, preferences, and the availability of resources and structured programs. Informal mentorship can be more flexible and tailored to individual needs, while formal mentorship can provide a more organized and goal-oriented approach with support from an organization.

This book focuses on the formal mentor, but the information is also valid with an informal mentor. You might even find something useful if you are a mentor yourself.

MENTORING WITH HEINZ

We have weekly virtual meetings. Each meeting has a theme and time for open coaching, sometimes with a surprise guest. In one of these meetings, the guest was Dr Heinz Kabutz from JavaSpecialits. They publish the Java Specialists Newsletter and are teaching their own Java courses. Heinz is a Java Champion and is well-known in the Java community.
A mentor often has a broad professional network. They can introduce you to valuable contacts, industry experts, potential collaborators, and job opportunities you might not have encountered otherwise.

Heinz spoke with us for two hours about how he built his business and how it is to work as an independent consultant. We basically got a mentoring session with him. His experience gave us insights we could not have found in textbooks or online courses. He shared real-world examples and practical knowledge that enriched our learning.

I had the chance to observe how the other mentees interacted with Heinz. Some were more talkative than others. Some asked questions, some did not. We should be ready for situations like these so we can ask the right questions to overcome our challenges. You can prepare by making sure that you know your current goal and have an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses. Make sure that you at least introduce yourself. If you do, the chance is higher that they will remember you the next time you meet them.

We also need to work on our fear of failure and to look incompetent. We improve our skills the most when we practice on the edge of our current skill level. We will not grow if we let the fear of failure stop us from learning.

He also told us that many speakers attend conferences to meet and talk to people. Often, nobody will do that. As an attendee, it's easier to go up and talk to a speaker than it is for a speaker to go up to an attendee. It's awkward, "Hello, I'm Markus. What do you want to ask me?". An attendee can instead say, "Hi, my name is Markus, and I saw your presentation on hamster breeding and am really interested in that. Can I ask you a question?".

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Be prepared to train your toughnes muscle. In his book Tough, Greg Everett defines toughness as:

- Capability - Who are you?
- Capacity - What are you able to do?
- Character - What are you able to withstand?
- Commitment - What are you willing to do?

Identify Your Goals. Clearly define what you hope to achieve through mentorship. Whether it's skill development, career advancement, or personal growth, knowing your goals will help you find the right mentor.

Set Aside Time for Growth. Allocate dedicated time in your schedule for self-improvement, learning, and implementing the insights gained from mentorship.

Reflect on Your Skills and Challenges. Identify your strengths and weaknesses and any challenges you might have. Be prepared to discuss these during the mentorship.

Evaluate Your Availability. Assess how much time you can commit to mentorship. Mentoring is a two-way commitment, so ensure you can meet your obligations as a mentee.

SETTING GOALS

Once you have a clear understanding of your aspirations, it's time to set specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals. Your mentor can assist you in refining and defining your goals to make them SMART. For example, instead of saying you want to improve your leadership skills, a SMART goal could be "Complete a leadership development program within the next six months."

LEARNING SKILLS

Knowledge is the theoretical understanding of concepts and information, while skill is the practical ability to apply that knowledge to perform tasks or activities. Knowledge provides the basis.

WHAT IS SKILL?

We have to look into our brains to learn what a skill is.

Myelin is a fatty substance that wraps around nerve fibers, forming a protective and insulating layer. When it comes to skills, myelin plays a crucial role in improving the efficiency and speed of neural communication, which is essential for mastering various tasks.

As you practice and repeat a particular skill or activity, the myelin sheaths surrounding the relevant nerve pathways become thicker and more efficient at transmitting signals. This process, known as myelination, enhances the neural connections associated with that skill. The thicker the myelin sheath, the faster and more precise the signals can be transmitted, leading to improved performance and the development of expertise in that specific skill.

But there's one very important point about myelination - your brain doesn't choose the most efficient pathways to myelinate, it strengthens the pathways that are simply repeated the most! If you practice poor technique or do not correct your mistakes, your brain will strengthen those pathways to make them habits. As many of us already know, unwanted habits are hard to shake, so we must correct errors as soon as possible to myelinate the more efficient neural pathways. So remember: practice doesn't make perfect, ONLY PERFECT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

We will soon look at what a mentor can do to help when we learn a new skill. But let me tell you a short story that will give an example of how you can handle a common challenge people ask me about: I don't have time to focus on learning new skills because the project I'm on doesn't contain anything related to the thing I want to focus on.

PRACTICE IN DAILY WORK

There is usually a way to include what you want to focus on in your daily work. Let me give you an example of how I managed to do that. My focus is to help senior Java backend developers write maintainable code so they can become sought-after experts in the industry. To do that, I need to be more visible so that people know I exist. One way to do that is to join a community.

I recently joined a team as an architect. My first task was to look into some performance issues. Around the same time, our mentor had guests in our weekly check-in meeting. They represented a startup, Digma, that we're developing a tool for continuous feedback and wanted people to join their beta program. I jumped at the opportunity. It allowed me to work with a startup, give input from real-world use cases, extend my network, and solve performance problems with our product. It was a win for everybody involved.

DREYFUS MODEL

The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition, developed by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, is a framework that describes the stages individuals go through as they acquire skills, from novice to expert. Note: This is per skill. A person most likely is att different stages for different skills. The model emphasizes how individuals progress from following rules rigidly to developing intuitive, holistic understanding and judgment in a particular domain. Adjust teaching methods to match the learner's skill level. The five levels of the Dreyfus model are:

Novice: Novices have little or no experience in the domain and rely on rules or step-by-step instructions to perform tasks. They often find it challenging when confronted with unfamiliar situations because they lack the necessary context beyond their training.

Novices require explicit instructions, rules, and structured training. They benefit from step-by-step guidance and clearly defined processes. Examples of teaching changes include providing detailed tutorials, clear documentation, and closely supervised practice.

Advanced Beginner: Learners recognize recurring patterns in their experiences. They can perform slightly more complex tasks with some guidance. However, they may still struggle with uncommon or unfamiliar scenarios.

Individuals at this level still benefit from structured guidance but can handle slightly more complex tasks. Teachers should provide opportunities for learners to practice and encounter varied scenarios to help them recognize patterns. Feedback should focus on building a broader understanding.

Competent: Competent individuals have gained enough experience to function independently. They can handle a range of situations and start to prioritize tasks based on their understanding of the context. They're more adaptable and can troubleshoot issues more effectively.

Competent learners need opportunities for independent practice. Teachers should encourage them to apply their skills in real-world situations, providing more freedom and letting them make decisions based on their growing understanding of the context.

Proficient: Proficient individuals have developed a deep understanding of the domain. They can make more nuanced judgments based on intuition and experience. They can handle complex situations and are more flexible in their approach, choosing the best course of action based on the specific context.

Teaching for proficient individuals involves providing challenging and diverse scenarios that allow them to refine their judgment. Teachers can focus on discussing strategies, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting deeper domain exploration.

Expert: Experts have reached the highest level of skill acquisition. They possess a deep, intuitive understanding of the domain and can handle even the most complex, uncertain situations. Their decision-making is highly effective and often seems intuitive to outsiders.

Experts thrive on continuous learning and opportunities to refine their expertise. They benefit from discussions with peers and exposure to new and cutting-edge developments. Teachers can act as facilitators, providing access to advanced resources, fostering collaboration, and encouraging mentorship within the domain.

Educators can effectively support skill development and guide individuals toward expertise in their chosen domain by adapting teaching methods to the learner's level on the Dreyfus model.

We now know the difference between knowledge and skill. We also know that we must practice to improve a skill. We go through stages in developing that skill. How will having a mentor help with this?

MENTOR AND LEARNING SKILLS

Accountability. A mentor can hold you accountable for the tasks you plan to do to improve a specific skill. They can help fight the procrastination we use as an excuse when things get hard. It's easier to get things done if somebody checks if you did your tasks or not.

Deliberate practice. Deliberate practice can be demanding and requires perseverance. A mentor provides motivation and encouragement, helping you push through plateaus, setbacks, and moments of frustration.

Immediate Feedback. A mentor can point out errors or areas that need improvement as you practice, helping you make real-time corrections. This feedback help you understand where you need improvement and guides you toward more effective learning strategies.

Enhanced learning. A mentor can help you set specific learning objectives. They can help you prioritize what skills or knowledge areas to focus on, ensuring learning efforts are targeted and aligned with your career goals. *Stretch boundaries*: A mentor can challenge you to stretch your limits and explore new areas of learning. They can introduce you to advanced concepts or encourage you to tackle complex projects that allows you to grow.

Experience. A mentor's experience can provide you with insights you might not find in textbooks or online courses. They can share real-world examples, case studies, and practical knowledge that enrich your learning.

Learn from misstakes. A mentor often shares their mistakes and lessons learned. Learning from their experiences can save you from making the same errors, giving you a more efficient learning path.

Continoius learning. Mentorship provides opportunities to learn from someone with more experience. Even at the senior level, there's always something new to discover, whether it's the latest technologies, best practices, or innovative approaches. A mentor can keep you updated and help you stay at the forefront of the industry

Celebrate successes. It reinforces the value of the effort you've put into your skill development, encouraging you to continue with the same level of dedication and enthusiasm. This positive atmosphere fosters a sense of belonging and encourages open communication, making it easier to discuss challenges and seek guidance.

TYPES OF MENTORS

Technical Guru. This mentor excels in technical prowess. They have deep expertise in specific programming languages, frameworks, or technologies. They can help the senior developer expand their technical skills, troubleshoot complex issues, and learn advanced techniques.

Domain Expert. A mentor with extensive knowledge in a particular domain, such as AI, cybersecurity, web development, or mobile app development, can help the senior developer deepen their understanding of that field and stay current with trends and advancements.

Inspirational Mentor. This mentor might not necessarily offer specific technical advice but is a source of inspiration and motivation. They can share their personal journey. Stories of overcoming challenges and instill confidence in the senior developer's abilities.

IMPROVE MY CAREER

A mentor can help you define and achieve your career goals. They can provide insights into work-life balance, communication skills, leadership qualities, and other aspects of personal development.
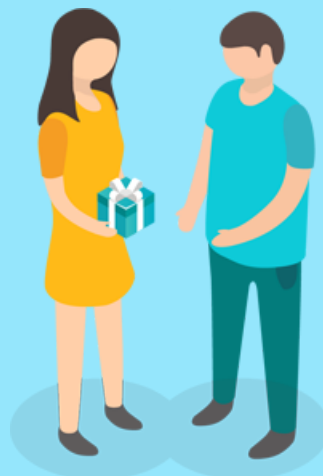
FIVE ORDERS OF IGNORANCE

The "Five Orders of Ignorance" categorizes our level of ignorance or lack of knowledge in various domains. It outlines five stages, ranging from the first order (you know something) to the fifth order (you don't know about the five orders of ignorance). Understanding these orders of ignorance can be essential when learning new skills.

Having a mentor can be a powerful way to reduce your order of ignorance when learning new skills. They provide guidance, feedback, and a valuable perspective that helps you identify what you need to learn and how to do so effectively. It can accelerate your learning and development, ensuring you progress from not knowing what you don't know to becoming more knowledgeable and skilled in your chosen field.

HOW CAN A MENTOR HELP ME?

Career advancement. A mentor can help you define and achieve your career goals. They can offer guidance on potential career paths, suggest skill development strategies, and help you navigate the challenges that come with career advancement, such as transitioning into leadership roles.

Personal development. A mentor can help you develop not only as a professional but also as an individual. They can provide insights into work-life balance, communication skills, leadership qualities, and other aspects of personal development.

Emotional support. Senior roles can come with increased pressure and responsibilities. A mentor can be a source of emotional support, providing advice and encouragement and helping you navigate challenging situations.

Wisdom and perspective. By leveraging their wisdom and perspective, a mentor helps you avoid common pitfalls, make informed decisions, and grow as a professional. Their guidance ensures that you benefit from the lessons they've learned, accelerating your development and helping you achieve your career aspirations.

WHAT TYPE OF MENTOR CAN I USE?

Career Strategist. This mentor knows how to navigate career paths. They can provide guidance on setting long-term career goals, transitioning into leadership roles, negotiating salary and benefits, and making strategic career moves.

Soft Skills Mentor. While technical skills are crucial, soft skills like communication, teamwork, leadership, and emotional intelligence are equally important for senior developers. A mentor who excels in these areas can help the senior developer become a more effective and well-rounded professional.

Entrepreneurial Mentor. If the senior developer has aspirations of starting their own tech company or venture, an entrepreneurial mentor can offer guidance on entrepreneurship, business strategies, funding, market trends, and scaling a business.

Mentor for Work-Life Balance. As a senior developer, maintaining a healthy work-life balance is crucial. A mentor who has successfully balanced their career with personal life can offer valuable insights on time management, stress reduction, and achieving a fulfilling professional and personal life.

BUILD REPUTATION

Reputation refers to the collective assessment, opinion, or perception that individuals or entities hold about the character, trustworthiness, credibility, and overall quality of a person.

REPUTATION

Reputation refers to the collective assessment, opinion, or perception that individuals or entities hold about the character, trustworthiness, credibility, and overall quality of a person. It is a measure of the esteem, respect, or credibility that a person has within a specific community, industry, or society at large. A reputation can be positive, negative, or neutral and is often shaped by a person's actions, behaviors, performance, and interactions with others over time.

HOW CAN A MENTOR HELP ME?

Expanded network. A mentor often has a broad professional network. They can introduce you to valuable contacts, industry experts, potential collaborators, and job opportunities you might not have encountered otherwise.

Celebrate successes. When your mentor acknowledges and celebrates your achievements, it provides a sense of validation and recognition for your hard work and progress. This recognition can boost your confidence and self-esteem.

A mentor is crucial in helping you appreciate and celebrate your successes by providing the necessary context, recognition, and guidance. They understand that the path to achievement is often marked by challenges and hard work that might not be immediately apparent to others. Through their support, you can fully embrace and savor your accomplishments while maintaining a growth mindset. Like an iceberg, only about 10% is visible above the water's surface. The remaining 90% lies beneath.

WHAT TYPE OF MENTOR CAN I USE?

Networking Mentor. A mentor who is well-connected in the tech industry can introduce the senior developer to valuable contacts, industry events, and opportunities for collaboration, helping them expand their professional network.

Mentor from Another Industry. Sometimes, fresh perspectives from different industries can be valuable. A mentor from a non-tech background can bring creative problem-solving approaches, innovative ideas, and unique insights that can be applied to software development.

Diversity and Inclusion Mentor. In an increasingly diverse tech landscape, a mentor who champions diversity and inclusion can guide the senior developer in creating inclusive teams, understanding diverse perspectives, and fostering a more inclusive work environment.

Part 4

FINDING A MENTOR

How do I find a mentor and how do I know that I found the right one?

WHERE TO LOOK FOR A MENTOR?

The company culture affects how easy it is to find a mentor. We can all make it easier by realizing that no one knows everything and everyone has something to teach. Our experience makes us all unique.

Within Your Current Organization. Look for experienced colleagues within your current workplace who you admire and respect. These individuals might be in more senior roles or have extensive experience in the areas you're interested in. Reach out to them and express your interest in mentorship.

Professional Networking Events. Attend industry conferences, workshops, meetups, and tech events. These gatherings provide an excellent opportunity to meet experienced professionals who could maybe become your mentor. Engage in meaningful conversations and establish connections.

Online Communities. Join online platforms and communities specific to your tech stack or industry. Websites like Stack Overflow, GitHub, LinkedIn, or specialized forums can be great places to connect with experienced developers who might be open to mentorship.

Professional Associations. Many industries have professional associations or groups for specific technical areas. These associations often provide mentorship programs or can help you connect with experienced professionals willing to mentor.

Alumni Networks. If you have a technical degree, check if your alma mater offers mentorship programs or if you can connect with those who have succeeded in the tech industry.

Recommendations from Colleagues. Ask your colleagues or friends in the industry if they know of any experienced developers who are open to mentoring you. Personal referrals can lead to successful mentorship relationships.

Online Mentorship Platforms. There are online platforms that match mentors and mentees based on their goals and areas of expertise. Websites like CodingCoach, Mentoring.io, MicroMentor, or even general freelancing platforms can help you find experienced mentors.

LinkedIn. Utilize LinkedIn to search for professionals in your field or industry open to mentorship. Send personalized messages explaining your background and goals, and ask if they want to share their experiences.

Professional Development Courses. If you're taking a professional development course, inquire if the instructor offers mentorship opportunities. Often, instructors or experienced professionals are available to provide guidance.

FINDING THE RIGHT MENTOR

Choosing the right mentor is crucial for a successful mentorship experience. Here are some factors to consider when evaluating whether a mentor is the right fit for you.

1. Alignment of Goals: Ensure that your mentor's goals align with yours. Discuss your career aspirations, areas of interest, and what you hope to achieve through the mentorship. A mentor who understands and supports your objectives is more likely to provide valuable guidance.
2. Relevant Experience: Look for a mentor with experience in areas that are important to you. If you're seeking career advancement, a mentor who has successfully navigated similar career paths is ideal. If you want to improve specific technical skills, find a mentor with expertise in those areas.
3. Effective Communication: A mentor should be a good communicator. They should be able to convey ideas clearly, listen attentively to your questions and concerns, and provide constructive feedback. Effective communication ensures you can understand and implement the advice and insights they share.
4. Availability and Commitment: Consider the mentor's availability and commitment to the mentorship. Mentoring requires time and effort from both parties. Ensure your mentor is willing and able to dedicate the time needed to guide you and provide support.
5. Compatibility: Personal compatibility matters. While you don't need to be best friends, a positive and respectful rapport is essential. If you feel comfortable discussing your goals and challenges with the mentor, it's a good sign that the relationship will be productive.
6. Experience and Wisdom: A mentor should have experience and wisdom you respect. Their insights should resonate with you, and you should feel that their advice is valuable based on their track record.
7. Positive Influence: A good mentor should inspire you to push your boundaries, learn, and grow. They should challenge you to think critically and provide encouragement when needed. A mentor who is a positive influence can motivate you to achieve your goals.
8. Willingness to Invest: A mentor should genuinely care about your development and be invested in your success. They should be willing to share their knowledge, introduce you to valuable contacts, and go the extra mile to help you progress.
9. Openness to Feedback: A mentor should be receptive to your feedback. They should be willing to adapt their mentoring approach based on your needs and preferences.
10. Trustworthiness: Trust is essential in a mentor-mentee relationship. You should trust that your mentor has your best interests at heart and that they're providing honest, unbiased advice.

Before fully committing to a mentorship, have an initial conversation or meeting with the potential mentor. Ask questions, express your expectations, and gauge their responses. Trust your instincts and consider how comfortable and confident you feel about the mentor's ability to guide you toward your goals. You've likely found the right mentor if it feels like a good fit.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR MENTOR

Effective communication is essential for a successful mentor-mentee relationship. You have several options for communicating with your mentor, and it's important to pick a method that works well for both of you. Here are some common communication channels you can use:

- In-Person Meetings: Meeting face-to-face is valuable for building rapport and discussing more complex topics. Consider scheduling regular in-person meetings if you and your mentor are in the same area. It can be at your workplace, a coffee shop, or other convenient locations.
- Virtual Meetings: If meeting in person isn't feasible, virtual meetings using video conferencing tools like Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams can provide a similar level of engagement. Virtual meetings allow visual cues and more personal interaction, even if you're physically distant.
- Phone Calls: Sometimes, a simple phone call is the most efficient way to talk with your mentor. It can be used for quick updates, asking specific questions, or discussing topics that don't require visual aids.
- Email: Email is a good channel for sending longer messages, sharing documents or resources, or discussing non-urgent matters. It's a suitable way to communicate asynchronously, allowing you and your mentor to respond when convenient.
- Text Messaging: Text messages can be efficient for quick updates or brief questions. Ensure that your mentor is comfortable with this mode of communication, and establish boundaries to respect each other's time.
- Messaging Apps: Use messaging apps like Slack, Microsoft Teams, or other team collaboration platforms for ongoing communications. Dedicated channels for mentorship questions make it easy to share information, ask questions, and have ongoing conversations.
- Online Forums: If you and your mentor are part of an online community or platform, you might use that forum for communication. Use the community platform to discuss industry-related topics, share resources, and engage in group discussions.
- Scheduled Check-Ins: Establish a regular schedule for check-in meetings, whether weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. They provide a structured framework for communication and ensure that you have dedicated time to discuss progress, challenges, and goals.
- Social Media: You can connect with your mentor on professional social media platforms like LinkedIn or X. You can stay updated on each other's activities and share valuable industry insights.
- In-Person Events: If there are industry events, conferences, or meetups, consider attending them with your mentor. It allows for informal, in-person discussions in a professional setting.

Choose the communication methods that align with your and your mentor's preferences. Be clear about your expectations and ensure that you establish boundaries regarding response times, the urgency of messages, and the preferred modes of communication. Consistent and effective communication will enhance the mentor-mentee relationship and promote a more productive and fulfilling experience.

CHANGES WITH A MENTOR

I joined my mentor's group of mentees shortly after having my first one-on-one talk. It was in January of this year. We have meetings once a week where we share challenges and successes. Our mentor usually presents some relevant information. There are benefits of having a group of like-minded who go through the same process. We can support, motivate, and comfort each other. It's possible to learn from other people's successes and challenges.
Nearly a year later, I was delivering a presentation at the largest developer conference in Europe.

While it hasn't been a smooth journey, I could see that the more effort I put in, the more results I got. I have probably spent 5-10 hours per week working on myself and my career. It would not have been possible without a mentor to guide me. It has been easier than I thought to spend this many extra hours because I had a purpose and a clear goal to work towards. I took responsibility for the actions I committed to each week, and I could observe how they progressively moved me closer to my objective.

By having a focus and a clear goal to work towards, I have less fear of missing out on things than before. I feel calmer and have a better structure in my learning than before. I feel less stressed about my career. Small setbacks don't bother me as much as before.

I now have defined goals and steps to reach those goals. It makes it easier to see the progress and to know what to do next.

I've realized that I can enhance my career not by working harder but by working smarter.

I have gotten involved as a beta tester in a startup and also in an open-source project. It has allowed me to learn new things, meet new people, and extend my network.
I was very shy in school and hated doing presentations in class. I have been working on this for many years, but it's only in the last year I have gotten the confidence to do a presentation at an international conference. Doing it in my second language is an even bigger challenge. The mentoring helped me understand that we do presentations for people because we have something to share that will help them solve a problem. You don't care about me. You care about a problem you have that I might help you with. The reason I'm doing this is that I had an experience that helped me and that I wanted to share.

Part 5

BE A GOOD MENTEE

Growth Mindset, Continuous learning and communication are skills that you need to get the most out of a mentorship.

"Do or do not. There is no try."

-Yoda

"The greatest teacher, failure is."

-Yoda

GROWTH MINDSET

Definition: This is a belief or attitude that fosters a love for learning and a belief in one's ability to learn and grow. It's about embracing challenges, persisting through setbacks, and seeing failures as opportunities for improvement.

Characteristics:

- Embracing challenges and viewing them as opportunities to learn.
- Being open to new ideas and perspectives.
- Seeing effort as a path to mastery.
- Embracing failures as a part of the learning process.
- Believing that abilities and intelligence can be developed over time.
- Practice Critical Thinking. Understand the "why" behind things.
- Teach What You Learn: Share your knowledge with others.

Focus: A growth mindset primarily focuses on one's attitude, beliefs, and approach to learning. It's about cultivating a positive and adaptable mental framework that encourages learning and growth.

Remember that developing a growth mindset is an ongoing process. It requires dedication, self-awareness, and a commitment to growth. Over time, this mindset will become a natural part of your professional identity, helping you adapt and thrive in an ever-changing environment.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Definition: Continuous learning refers to the practice of consistently seeking knowledge, acquiring new skills, and staying updated in one's field or areas of interest throughout one's life and career.

Characteristics:

- Involves actively seeking opportunities for learning.
- Requires a commitment to ongoing skill development.
- Involves adapting to changes in technology, industry trends, and best practices.
- Encompasses formal education, informal self-study, and on-the-job learning.
- Adapt and Evolve.
- Is a long-term, sustained effort.
- Periodically reflect on what you've learned.

Focus: Continuous learning emphasizes the actions and behaviors associated with acquiring new knowledge and skills. It's about making a deliberate and sustained effort to stay informed and relevant in one's field.

Remember that continuous learning is a lifelong journey. It's not about completing a specific course or acquiring a certain certification; it's about maintaining a mindset of growth and exploration throughout your career. Embrace the process, stay curious, and never stop seeking opportunities to expand your knowledge and skills.

COMMUNICATION

Respect your mentor and their expertise. Maintain a respectful and professional tone in all your interactions with your mentor. Show gratitude for their time and guidance. Even if you disagree, express your thoughts respectfully and be open to discussion.

Show appreciation for your mentor's time, insights, and support. Express your gratitude for the value they bring to your learning journey. A positive and appreciative attitude encourages your mentor to continue investing in your growth.

Active listening. Pay close attention to what your mentor is saying. Listen actively. Ask clarifying questions. Make sure you put in the effort to fully understand their insights. Show that you value their input and respect their expertise.

Honesty. Be honest with yourself and your mentor. If you're struggling with a concept, admit it. If you're unsure about something, ask for clarification. Honesty fosters a transparent and productive mentorship relationship.

Openness and humility. Be open to new ideas, perspectives, and feedback. Approach each interaction with your mentor as an opportunity to learn and grow. Be willing to consider alternative viewpoints and be receptive to constructive criticism.

Goal setting. Set clear goals for your mentorship. Discuss your objectives with your mentor and seek their input on the steps to achieve them. Having specific goals helps you stay focused and provides a framework for your mentorship.

Proactiveness. By being proactive and engaged in your mentorship, you demonstrate your commitment to personal and professional growth. It shows your mentor that their time and expertise are being put to good use, making the mentorship relationship mutually rewarding.

Self-awareness. Understand your own strengths and weaknesses. Recognize the areas where you need improvement, and be willing to acknowledge when you don't know something. This self-awareness allows your mentor to tailor their guidance to your specific needs.

You'll become a more coachable mentee if you embody these qualities and demonstrate a genuine commitment to learning and growth. It will help you get the most from your mentorship and accelerate your professional development. Be the best mentee your mentor has.

PAY IT FORWARD

By sharing the benefits of your experience, you contribute to your mentee's growth. You foster a culture of networking and growth within your professional community.

"Pass on what you have learned."

-Yoda

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

-Winston Churchill

PAY IT FORWARD

When you have successfully leveraged your mentor's network to expand your own opportunities, remember to pay it forward. Be open to mentoring others and connecting them with your own network. By sharing the benefits of your experience, you contribute to your mentee's growth. You foster a culture of networking and growth within your professional community.

Becoming a mentor as a senior developer can bring about several valuable benefits:

- Reinforcement of Knowledge: Teaching others reinforces your own understanding of concepts and technologies. When you explain complex topics to mentees, you gain a deeper and more structured understanding of the subject matter.
- Enhanced Communication Skills: Mentoring hones your communication skills, both in explaining technical concepts in simpler terms and in providing constructive feedback. Strong communication skills are essential for senior developers who often work in collaborative environments.
- Leadership Development: Mentorship provides an opportunity to develop leadership skills. As a mentor, you guide and inspire others, which can be a stepping stone toward leadership roles within your organization.
- Personal Satisfaction: Many mentors find satisfaction in helping others succeed. Witnessing your mentees' growth and accomplishments can be personally rewarding and fulfilling.
- Legacy and Knowledge Sharing: As a senior developer, you have accumulated valuable knowledge and experience. Mentoring allows you to pass on this knowledge to the next generation of developers, leaving a positive legacy in your field.
- Networking: Through mentoring, you can expand your professional network. You'll connect with other mentors, mentees, and industry professionals, opening doors to new opportunities and collaborations.
- Fresh Perspectives: Mentoring often involves working with individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences. This exposure to different perspectives can spark innovation and help you see problems from new angles.
- Professional Growth: Teaching others encourages continuous learning. As you help mentees tackle new challenges, you may encounter situations and technologies you hadn't previously considered, leading to personal and professional growth.

- Enhanced Problem-Solving Skills: Mentoring exposes you to various issues and challenges your mentees encounter. This can sharpen your problem-solving skills as you work together to find solutions.
- Contribution to the Field: Mentoring contributes to the growth and development of the tech industry. By nurturing the talents of future developers, you play a part in advancing the field.
- Increased Job Satisfaction: Knowing that you're making a positive impact on others' careers and helping them achieve their goals can lead to increased job satisfaction.
- Recognition and Respect: Effective mentors are often highly regarded in their organizations and the industry. Your expertise and willingness to help others can earn you respect and recognition.

Overall, becoming a mentor as a senior developer can be a fulfilling and enriching experience that benefits your mentees but also contributes to your own personal and professional growth. It's a way to give back to the industry, leave a lasting impact, and continue your journey as a lifelong learner and leader.

SUMMARY

- There are formal mentors that you can use to grow as a senior developer.
- Find your focus and don't try to do everything.
- It's okay to ask for help.
- Continuous learning mindset. Go to conferences, join open-source projects, talk to people.
- Be the best mentee your mentor has.
- Nothing is free. The results you get are directly proportional to the work you put in. When all your efforts are directed toward a single goal, you'll make more progress with less effort.
- Many small steps will get you far if they are in the same direction. Consistency is key.
- Don't compare yourself to others. We usually only see the result and not all the work that was needed to reach that result.

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