Ask SCORE

Each year, SCORE volunteers mentor thousands of small business owners and would-be entrepreneurs across the country. Over time, we have learned what makes for the most successful mentor/mentee relationships. Here are some tips for maximizing the benefits you can get from the experience.

Embracing the help of a SCORE business mentor offers many advantages to entrepreneurs. Whether you’re in the early stages of exploring a business idea or already running an established business, a mentor can provide valuable guidance, serve as an objective sounding board for listening to and evaluating new ideas, and motivate you to be more accountable. With a SCORE mentor, you benefit from expertise and experience that can help you launch and/or grow your business.

Before you begin working with a mentor, consider what you can do to get the most fulfillment from your mentor/mentee relationship.

Do not be afraid to ask questions

Come prepared with a list of questions and issues you are facing to every meeting with your SCORE mentor. Mentors are there to answer even what seem to be the silliest questions. They do not judge you by what you know or do not know. They are there to develop your understanding and awareness. In addition, if they personally do not know the answer to a particular question, they can tap into the expertise of other SCORE mentors within their chapter or nationally.

Focus

When you talk with your mentor, be entirely present and ready to focus on your business issues. Unless you need them for research during your meeting, put your digital devices away so they will not distract you from your conversation.

Have realistic expectations

Your mentor is there to advise you, not to do the work for you. You will gain insight and direction from a mentor, but you will still have to work hard. Starting and running a small business requires effort—no exceptions.

Follow through

Do your homework! You should walk away from every meeting with your mentor with next steps (a.k.a. action items). Make sure you tackle what you agreed to do between meetings. If you slack off and do not take the initiative to complete the tasks necessary to move forward, you will not be able to take full advantage of your time together.
Keep an open mind

You and your mentor may not always see eye to eye on certain ideas or approaches. Rather than instantly discarding suggestions that do not align with your initial thoughts, consider your mentor’s frame of reference and experience in working with other SCORE mentees who faced similar challenges. The right answer may not always be what you want to hear, so it is important to listen with an objective ear.

Keep the lines of communication open

When first starting your business, you will probably find you need to meet with your mentor on a relatively frequent basis (possibly every week). As time goes by, your need to consult, your mentor may ebb and flow depending on the nature of the competition you are facing, industry changes or opportunities you want to pursue. Even when you do not feel you need to meet very often, keep your mentor up to date on what is happening in your business via email or a periodic phone call. That way, your mentor will be informed and better equipped to provide guidance when you do face a new challenge.

Getting Started

To find a SCORE mentor in your area who has expertise in the specific aspects of small business you need help with, visit www.score.org.

The Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE brings this column to you, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2017. The chapter has nearly 65 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit merrimackvalley.score.org for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.