How to Get The Most Benefit Of Having A Business Mentor

Having mentored small business CEOs for many years, I have observed a common missing link in the process. In many cases the CEO has not gotten the maximum benefit of the relationship because they have not prepared themselves to be ready for taking advantage of the possibilities. Embracing the help of a 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. Most of my mentoring experience has been as a SCORE mentor and as a result, I personally know hundreds of these volunteers from across the country who give their time to assist a small business CEO. Today’s topic is meant to focus on how you can get the most 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.

- **Don't be afraid to ask questions.**

  Come prepared with a list of questions and issues you’re facing to every meeting with your SCORE mentor. Mentors are there to answer even what seem to be the silliest questions. They don’t judge you by what you know or don’t know. They are there to develop your understanding and awareness. And if they personally don’t 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 won't 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 don’t take the initiative to complete the tasks necessary to move forward, you won’t 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 don't 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’s 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 or two). As time goes by, your need to consult your mentor may ebb and flow depending on the nature of the competition you’re facing, industry changes, or opportunities you want to pursue. Even when you don’t feel you need to meet very often, keep your mentor up to date on what’s 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 the SCORE website (www.score.org).

Dean L. Swanson
Southeast Minnesota SCORE
c/o Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce
220 South Broadway, Suite 100
Rochester, MN 55904
www.seminnesota.score.org/

*Dean is a volunteer Certified SCORE Mentor and former Regional Vice President for the North West Region