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Ten tips for women business owners looking for a mentor

We could all use a little guidance as we navigate our professional lives. For small business owners, that can translate to seeking a mentor, someone with a greater body of work and experience who can help us find our way.

For women entrepreneurs, it can also mean finding someone who can relate to the struggles inherent in a business world that has a long way to go before the playing field is truly balanced.

Here are 10 things to consider when looking for the right mentor.

1. Determine what you're looking for.

There is a lot to consider when pondering the need for a mentor. What do you need help with, what are your primary stresses and issues, along with your goals and ambitions? Take the time to list personal strengths and weaknesses, and the areas in which a mentor may provide a boost. Sonya Stinson writes about this for [Forbes](#).

"Finding a mentor may not be that difficult, but finding the right one could be," Stinson writes. "It all starts with understanding the benefits of mentoring, then determining what specifically you need and want from the relationship. Are you looking for better performance out of the team you're leading? ... Once goals are identified, it's easier to seek out the appropriate mentor."

2. Male or female?

Women leading a small business may naturally look to other women for mentoring, and for good reason. It's important to have someone that can relate to your perspective and understand your frustrations. Lahle Wolfe explores this for Women in Business on [about.com](#).

"A female mentor is likely to have encountered some sort of discrimination in the work place and may be better able to tell you how to crack a male-dominated industry or how to deal with gender discrimination issues than a man who has not had to deal with the same issues," Wolfe writes. "However, women who isolate themselves in an all-woman environment are missing out on the male perspective, and, because the majority of the business world is male-dominated, it is important for all business women to understand how to play the game to win."

3. Find someone with experience you admire.

A small business owner that achieves early success may think a mentor is unnecessary. Instead of focusing on what you've already achieved, consider growth potential. A mentor with experience can help to put you in the right direction, as Kelli Richards wrote for [inc.com](#).

"Young entrepreneurs often think they've cornered the market on innovative thinking," Richards wrote. "However, as anyone who has worked with a good mentor will tell you, they didn't become successful on their own. Often, a seasoned mentor can challenge you to think in ways that never occurred to you because they've seen more of the world (and more of business) than you have. They've also been innovating and solving problems for a much longer time. They won't have *all* the answers, but if you allow mentors to bolster your experience with theirs, you'll be able to operate much more shrewdly and with more confidence than you otherwise would on your own."

4. Keep it professional.

It's tempting to turn to a friend for professional mentoring, but it's better to resist the urge. Discussing the challenges of a small business with friends is natural, of course, but they may be less likely to provide the direction and focus that is needed. And personal matters can get in the way, Wolfe writes in her [about.com](#) story.

"It is critical that you be able to accept advice from a mentor and stay focused on the business aspect of the relationship and not the friendship aspect," Wolfe says. "This is much harder to do if you choose someone already close to you to be a mentor, especially if you see your mentor friend as a peer instead of as a professional resource to help you further your own business interests. If you want to avoid conflict with your mentor, it is better to save friend and family resources for networking! That way, if the mentor relationship does not work out you won't have to 'fire' your friends."



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5. Seek clarity.

Entrepreneurs face numerous challenges in getting a business off the ground and putting it on a successful path. A mentor can help to stay focused on the goal, and help to navigate some of those stressful situations, as described by Lisa Quast in a story for *Forbes*.

"... I've found women are much more successful when they have a mentor to help them define their career goals and objectives," she writes. "If you don't know where you want to go, how will you determine how to get there? A mentor will help you put a clear plan in place to ensure you achieve your career aspirations efficiently and quickly."

6. Seek guidance, not play-by-play.

The word "coaching" may be used in tandem with mentoring, but be careful of the traditional differences. In a story for *foxbusiness.com*, Nicole Fallon writes that "Mentorship does not mean someone telling you what moves to make; it's about someone encouraging you to find the answers yourself." The story features Nola Hennessy, founder and CEO of Serenidad Consulting, who says a mentor "must be nonjudgmental, an active listener, empathetic and very compassionate, providing advice only when asked."

"A good mentor will guide, not advise; inspire, not motivate; critique, not judge; and share ideas and options, but not do it for you," Hennessy said. "The mentee must be willing to open up to new ideas, act on guidance given, [and] be prepared to adapt and change."

7. Seek accountability.

This is a work value that may not be top of mind for a new small business owner. A mentor can step in and explain the need for accountability, as Quast writes in her *Forbes* story.

"A mentor brings accountability and this breeds responsibility," she says. "I've found that within a very short period of time, my mentees fall into the habit of holding themselves accountable for completing their action items. They learn from me, as their mentor (and I learn lots from them!), and then the excitement of completing tasks and seeing the results motivates them even more to hold themselves accountable and strive for achievements they previously thought were impossible."

8. Seek improved communication.

Communication — the skill that many of us have a constant need to work on — can be a big emphasis with mentors. As Richards writes for *inc.com*, an older perspective on our fast-paced texting-social-media world has benefits.

"While more seasoned mentors may be viewed as being behind the times for not carrying iPhones and other hot gadgets, their experience outweighs this notion," she writes. "Young entrepreneurs sometimes hide behind their technological devices and use quick text exchanges to correspond with people. Experienced mentors can share the intangible nuances of communication they have mastered through relationships they've forged the old fashioned way with rookie business leaders."

9. Seek real feedback.

As business owners go about looking for a mentor, they will need to be prepared for some form of constructive criticism. These comments may sting at first, but could pay dividends down the line. So welcome them, says Leyla Seka in a story for *entrepreneur.com* titled "A Girl's Guide to Finding an Awesome Mentor (and Being One)."

"There's no point in asking for input, though, if you aren't open to receiving it," she writes. "I've been told things that weren't easy to hear (like needing to improve my presentation skills and wardrobe), but hearing them made a big difference in my career."

10. Take advantage of networking possibilities.

Working with and impressing a mentor can open new doors of networking. As Richards explored in her *inc.com* story, a mentor's years of experience often translates into a wealth of contacts.

"You might be a networking genius, but if you've only been at it for a few years, you're still limited by that time frame," she writes. "A seasoned mentor, on the other hand, will have connections and a good reputation built up over years. He or she can see connections between people that you never could, at least in the early stages of starting your own business. Most importantly, though, a good mentor will have strong relationships with people who are already successful business leaders — and can help you make the most of their hard-won networks."

