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Are you an effective mentor?

4 points to ponder before taking on the tutorship

Being asked to be someone's mentor can be flattering—and perhaps a bit scary. After all, mentoring doesn't come with set-in-stone guidelines, and each relationship develops its own unique give and take. When considering the prospect, think about these four issues:

1. It isn't a commitment to be taken lightly

Instead of answering hastily, evaluate your own schedule and interests. If you truly don't want the position or feel uncomfortable with this particular person, politely declining is kinder than a half-hearted effort.

"Mentoring isn't for everyone—it takes an investment of time, a commitment to help others, and a lot of patience," says Lisa Quast, author of *Your Career, Your Way!*, president of Career Woman Inc., and founder of the Wing to Wing Women's Mentoring Project. She suggests pondering two questions: Am I ready to be someone's mentor, and do I have the time available? "Successful mentors need to be comfortable providing honest, constructive feedback," Quast says. "They also should have excellent listening skills and have the experience necessary to discuss a wide range of topics and situations. Also, mentoring requires an ongoing commitment. It's a bit like investing in the stock market, only instead of money you're investing your time and betting that with your help your mentee will be able to move forward in his or her career."

2. You shouldn't be a dictator

Mentors can share insight, provide food for thought, and act as

sounding boards. They shouldn't, however, be micromanagers.

"I had to learn that I can't fix my mentee's problems—no matter how tempting it may be—because that's not the purpose of the relationship. My role is to offer advice and help them learn how to solve problems on their own," says Pete Low, Chief Financial Officer at Halogen Software, who mentors through his company's Emerging Leaders Program.

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"Mentors should prompt mentees to think through hurdles and barriers and come up with plans on how to overcome them," Quast says. She recommends posing thought-provoking questions such as "What do you think are some

ways you could ...?" rather than telling a person what to do.

3. Trust takes time

While it's natural to want to see your charge succeed, resist the urge to push too hard or jump in too fast.

"It's critical to gain and maintain the trust of your mentee," Low says. "This isn't something that happens instantaneously; it takes time and effort. You need to create an environment where the mentee feels like they can say anything and won't be judged or feel like you're going to go talk to their direct boss."

Quast likewise cautions about immediately opening up your network. "Mentors should work with their



mentees until they fully understand his or her knowledge, skills, experience and integrity and are comfortable sharing appropriate networking opportunities. Taking the time to build trust is essential because mentors place their own reputation on the line when recommending mentees for job opportunities."

4. The relationship can be mutually beneficial

Finally, don't assume mentoring is a one-way street. Your mentee can offer a fresh take on your field, your company and maybe even your own career.

"Mentoring someone who works in a different area of the organization gives you a whole different perspective and a much broader understanding of the business," Low says.

Adds Quast, "The best mentoring relationships are where both parties benefit, not just the mentee. This is also known as 'reciprocal mentoring.' As a mentor, are you willing to assess your weaknesses/failures and discuss these with mentees? Are you willing to learn from your mentee, who might have expertise in areas you don't, such as social media or technology trends?"

If your answer is "yes," you might find you get as much from mentoring as you give.

