

Sometimes everyone needs a friend in their corner – and that’s especially true at work. Enter the mentor! “Mentors are both advisors and supporters. They are people with career experience who are willing to share their knowledge, as well as give emotional and moral encouragement when needed,” explains sociologist Morris Zelditch.

A mentor is not a professional career coach, but she can play a critical role in your career. For instance,

she may be someone more senior to you at work who can help you better understand your company’s culture, values and expectations. Or she may be from another industry, but able to give you practical tips on how to handle work issues you find tricky, such as dealing with a difficult colleague or client.

“A mentor can provide very helpful guidance to lead you in the right direction,” shares Saw Phaik Hwa, president and CEO of SMRT Corporation, adding, “My advice is that

it is best not to have just one mentor, but to glean your learning from many sources.” It’s good to get advice from various sources because mentors often give you advice based on their own experiences. It’s not management school theory – it’s work truths she’s learnt on the job. Learning how she dealt with a situation can help you make better decisions about your own actions.

A mentor’s independent opinion may also help you avoid potential pitfalls and show you opportunities you may not

previously have considered. But, you should know where to draw the line, say experts. The key objective of being in a mentor relationship is to learn and get guidance about your career path. However, you should beware of asking your mentor for a direct favour, such as getting a plum role or assignment. “Such requests are not appropriate as they might jeopardise your mentor’s integrity. Instead be honest about your desires to join a project and ask for advice on how to successfully approach your manager

to let you on it,” advises Hega Schultz, CEO of HS Coaching & Consulting ([www.hs-coaching.com](http://www.hs-coaching.com)), which offers career and business coaching.

### How to find a mentor

So how do you go about approaching someone to be your mentor? Sheila Wellington, CEO of Catalyst, and author of *Be Your Own Mentor: Strategies From Top Women On The Secrets of Success* says, “You have to be strategic about picking a mentor – think about what kind of advice you’ll require most in the long term. Then zero in on someone who answers your requirements and has a good vibe.”

Advises Phaik Hwa, “Look for someone who can help you overcome your weaknesses, or who can teach you specific skills from their experiences.”

Hega adds, “If you do not know the person well, then send an email, briefly

explaining why you are approaching her, and politely ask for a meeting to discuss things further. After your meeting, give your potential mentor time to think over the commitment, and ask them to come back to you after a given time – for example, in a week’s time.”

### Take it to the next level

Once you have found your mentor, the next step is for you both to discuss your expectations and what you hope to achieve from the relationship. Hega shares, “As your mentor is devoting her time to you, it is advisable that you take the responsibility for managing the relationship, and that includes setting up the meetings and coming up with topics to discuss.”

Says Phaik Hwa, “The mentorship should adopt a collaborative approach, but at the same time, encourage the mentee to become more independent.”

### How often should you meet?

“A weekly call to your mentor might be too frequent as she has her own life to handle, but an email per month to let her know how things are progressing is reasonable,” says Hega. “Setting up a quarterly lunch is also a good way to keep in touch.”

“There are no hard-and-fast rules,” adds Phaik Hwa. “It really depends on the comfort level between the two parties, and both their schedules. What matters is that these sessions are focused and meaningful.”

### Show your gratitude

It seems difficult to adequately thank your mentor, when she has given you her valuable time and insights. “Most good mentors are happy when they see others succeed,” says Hega.

It’s not always necessary to give tangible gifts to your mentor, though a hand-written note is a nice way to show your appreciation. Hega sums it up nicely, “Always remember to give positive feedback. For a mentor, there’s probably no greater compliment than hearing that they’ve made a difference in someone’s life!” **W**



# The secret to getting ahead at work

You put in the hours and the effort. So why don't you get more pay rises and promotions? Maybe it's time to fast forward your career by finding yourself a mentor *By CANDY LIM*



### PREPARATION IS KEY

Last year Saw Phaik Hwa, president and CEO of SMRT Corporation, was given the Woman Professional Of The Year Award by the Institute of Advertising Singapore.

A mentor to several people, she shares how what you can do to get the best out of your mentoring sessions.

- Prior to the first meeting, think carefully and thoroughly about your professional goals.
- Prepare a realistic list of things you would like

to achieve through your regular mentoring sessions. Be as specific as possible.

- Understand the professional background and skill sets of your mentor thoroughly so you will know how to tap her expertise more effectively.
- Keep an open mind, have a positive attitude and ensure you keep your mentor updated.

### FIND A MENTOR TOMORROW...

Try The Singapore Women In Mentoring (SWIM). Initiated by the Singapore Business & Professional Women's Association ([www.sbpwa.org.sg](http://www.sbpwa.org.sg)), it provides a platform for professional women in Singapore to network and form effective mentor-protégé relationships with members. SWIM meets regularly for informal “Chat & Drink” sessions as well as forums and talks, where invited speakers share their expertise.

Another option is the Women's Register ([www.womensregister.org](http://www.womensregister.org)), where you will have access to an online mentor, as well as receive information about volunteering opportunities and invitations to career clinics and dialogue sessions. Individual membership is open to all women in Singapore between the ages of 18 to 35 years. If you sign up before May 31, 2011, your first year's annual membership is free.