

How to Be a Smart Protégé

Eight tips for setting up a network of mentors

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It's not easy to be a protégé these days.

Everybody knows the setup of the classic mentoring relationship: Older workers take junior colleagues under their wing and stay in their lives for years, giving them one-on-one advice and shepherding them through their careers. Nowadays, though, seasoned workers rarely stay in a job long enough to stick close to a protégé for any length of time. And they're often too harried managing their own careers to devote lots of attention to somebody else's.

Last year in these pages, Kathy E. Kram and Monica C. Higgins proposed a different model—the developmental network. Instead of looking to one person as a guide, a would-be protégé should build up a team of mentors drawn from all areas of his or her professional and personal lives. That way, you don't have to rely too heavily on one person to give you all the guidance you need. And you get a broader range of advice and information.

But there's a snag: Most people aren't very good at creating and maintaining these networks. Obviously, it takes a lot more effort to track down a team of helpers than a single mentor. But it also takes a special blend of skills and strategy to find just the right people and cultivate rewarding relationships with them.

To find out the best way to approach the task, we looked for people who are "relationally savvy"—in other words, they have demonstrated a knack for building networks. We interviewed a number of these talented protégés, as well as their mentors and three career coaches, to figure out what makes them tick—the abilities they bring to the table and the approaches they use to keep people on their side.

Here's a look at how Savvys make networking work for them.

1. Talk First—and Often.

Savvys aren't shy about initiating—and maintaining—contact with people who can support their development. They constantly ask for information, help, feedback and advice. As one Savvy puts it: "The way I see it, a lot of people are waiting to be invited for someone to tap them on the shoulder and then take them under their wing. In my experience, that just doesn't happen; you have to go after someone."

And they don't just talk to the peers and bosses they deal with every day, who have a vested interest in helping them along. They might talk to senior managers in other parts of the company, for instance, and ask to learn about their side of the operation. Savvys who are bosses might ask their subordinates for feedback on their management and leadership skills.

In their communities, meanwhile, Savvys often reach out to folks in volunteer and industry associations, as well as schools where they're getting graduate degrees.

2. Read Between the Lines.

Savvys are expert at recognizing when colleagues are interested in becoming mentors—even when the colleagues aren't being direct about it. Let's say a senior colleague asks a junior about the kinds of challenges he or she is facing. Most people might just think the older worker is being nice. A Savvy would see potential there and try to strike up a relationship.

One Savvy, for instance, realized she was getting signals from a senior co-worker while working on a project. The co-worker was giving cues that said, "I think you're a smart, interesting young woman and I'd like to mentor you," or "I think you're a smart woman. I want to be friends with you," the Savvy says. "It was an invitation to continue the relationship after the work had been finished. And I don't think that people think of it as an invitation, but you have to."

3. Go the Extra Mile.

Savvys put in lots of work at the start of a relationship with a mentor, to make sure that it gets off the ground. That might mean, for instance, being assertive about getting together outside of work so they can talk privately and informally. One Savvy who had just accepted a job happened to be near the office on a holiday. She decided to stop in and see if the woman who had hired her was around. As it turns out, the woman was at her desk—and was impressed with the new hire's initiative. The mentoring relationship began then and there.

Likewise, Savvys keep in frequent contact with their mentors—even if it's just to touch base. That helps keep the relationship strong.

As one Savvy describes her time with a mentor: "We had a standing [weekly] coffee chat, where we got together for half an hour to an hour. It was important to talk about the work, but it was more often just checking up on what we were doing.... I asked if we could do that because we didn't have any regular contact. I thought it would be helpful if we got together on a weekly basis just for checking in. She thought it was a great idea."

Dawn Chandler talks with the Journal's Erin White about how companies can encourage mentoring.

4. Do Your Homework.

Savvys always come prepared for meetings with a current or potential mentor. Let's say there's a particular challenge they want to discuss. They might research the topic thoroughly and come up with a bunch of different approaches for the mentor to review. This shows the mentor that the Savvy is competent and eager to meet challenges, and values their time together.

But the thoroughness doesn't end there. Savvys follow up with people who have counseled them, to let them know how their support helped and otherwise keep them up-to-date. Again, this shows the Savvy is eager to improve and values the wisdom the mentor brings to the table.

One mentor says of her Savvy protégé: "Unlike other relationships I've had, that one I thought really worked nicely because she took it very seriously and spent time thinking through what she wanted to cover.... Then, she would come back the next time and say, 'You know how we talked about this.... I did that. I talked to [so and so], and it actually worked out great. That was good advice, thank you. I learned something there.'"

5. Share Information.

Most people don't like talking about their problems and weaknesses—for perfectly understandable reasons. These can be sensitive areas, and people don't like to look weak in front of colleagues. Savvys, however, understand that deep relationships are based on openness, sharing and trust. When you share problems with people, they realize that you hold them in esteem and appreciate your confidence.

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To be sure, that doesn't mean pouring out your deepest and darkest secrets to your mentors. Instead, what Savvys disclose are things like career failures that taught them a lesson, challenges that stood in the way of their success, disabilities that they have struggled with and conflicts with another person in the organization.

6. Make It Mutual.

Mentoring networks involve shared learning between two people. Too many people enter the relationships thinking of themselves as plebeian protégés who get support. Savvys, on the other hand, realize they have something to offer their mentors, too, and help them out whenever they can—which gives the other person a deeper vested interest in them.

One Savvy, a technology consultant, describes how she fostered relationships with three senior colleagues: "If I saw a senior consultant who was swamped with something, and I realized that I didn't necessarily have the computer intellect to be on his level there, but I could type really fast and I could be creative and design the presentation, and I could help with all the interviewing, I said as much to him. I said to him, 'Listen, I'd like to help you out if you'd like it.'"

7. Be Personable...

The final qualities Savvys offer are perhaps the most basic—but also the toughest to duplicate.

For one, they're simply easy to get along with. They have empathy, the ability to listen, strong conflict management and other social skills, which help them build rapport with others and manage disagreements. They leave people feeling positive toward them and eager to continue the relationship.

For instance, one colleague says of a Savvy: "He's an engaging guy, just a nice, delightful person to talk to." Contrast that with the reaction to someone who isn't so socially skilled: "When he is in a bad mood, we kind of tiptoe around him."

8. ...And Have a Positive Attitude.

Of course, not everybody has a strong, charismatic personality. And it can be tough to summon one up if it doesn't come naturally. But there are practical lessons you can take away from Savvys without having to become the life of the party.

You might try adopting the positive attitudes that Savvys bring to the table. For instance, simply assume that people around you want to lend a hand. Humility is all well and good, but you're going to hamper your ability to network if you keep thinking, "If I ask for help, I'm bothering people," or "I just don't want to be presumptuous and assume that somebody wants to help me."

Savvys lean on people without thinking of it as a burden—instead, they see it as a chance to build bridges. That attitude puts them and the other person at ease.

I found that the people that are most successful in business actually realize that asking for help gives people the opportunity to help you," says a career coach. "It earns you a huge amount of respect in the workplace."

"Try to figure out if there's something you could do to make yourself useful," says another coach. "And sometimes the way you make yourself useful is by needing advice. People love to give advice."

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Get the Knack

"Relationally savvy" people who succeed at building and sustaining networks of mentors are more likely than others to:

- **Take the initiative** to strike up and maintain relationships with mentors.
- **Recognize and respond** to even subtle expressions of interest from would-be mentors.
- **Reach** beyond immediate peers and bosses to others in the company, as well as in the community.
- **Make sure** they have frequent contact with each of their mentors.
- **Prepare** for meetings with their mentors and let them know how their advice has helped them.
- **Lend** their mentors a hand when they can on projects at work.
- **Be open** with their mentors about challenges they're facing at work.
- **Do their best** to be positive and personable.

Source: Dawn E. Chandler, Douglas T. Hall and Kathy E. Kram

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