

Are You Experiencing Mentor Whiplash? Here's How to Manage Too Many Opinions.



Seeking advice is great, but conflicting opinions can leave a founder's head spinning. Here's how to manage mentors.

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At Blue Startups, a venture accelerator in Hawaii, we are about to enter into our 12th cohort, and as such we have seen a lot of founders (over 300) and a lot of mentors (over 150) interact over the years. So, how can you get the most out of these relationships? Seeking advice is an important part of the entrepreneurial journey, but you have to know how to take it.

Let's say you have back-to-back meetings with mentors on the topic of sales. One advises you to build a sales team and tackle direct sales, the other advises you to sell through distribution partners. You come out of these meetings reeling – which direction do you go? How do you determine what is right for your company? How do you maintain a relationship with the mentor whose advice you did not take? How do you tactfully decline advice without being offensive? These are tricky questions, let's tackle them one at a time.

When in doubt, ask your customers

Mentors and advisors are not your customers. You may not even be your own customer. But your customers have the answers, all you have to do is ask. As a mentor, I am always advising companies to talk to their customers, basic lean startups methodology 101, but you would be surprised how many entrepreneurs do not take this advice! And they do so at their own peril.

We invested in a company in the ed-tech industry years ago, and they were getting conflicting advice about direction. I advised them to talk to their customers – but they didn't – and the company is now out of business. That founder came back to me years later and told me they should have listened to that simple, but critical source of information.

Trust yourself – you may already have the answers

It is hard as a founder, especially a first-time founder, to trust themselves. I always tell our founders, you know this company better than anyone and at the end of the day, the buck stops with you. You can respectfully tell a mentor that you do not feel their advice will work for your company. Ask yourself what you know, what your gut tells you, what your team tells

you and what your customers tell you. All of these people are closer to the company's truth than an advisor or mentor.

One of our companies actually let a key employee go on the advice of a mentor. They felt that the mentor was so sure of this advice it must have been right. But in the end, they really regretted this decision. It set their development timeframe back by 6 months and in effect killed their competitive edge. While the founder was angry with this mentor, I pointed out, the decision was still his to make and he should have stood his ground and made the decision he knew was right for his company.

You can politely decline the advice

I know this is hard. A mentor with many years more experience than you is gifting their time and expertise to you, don't you have the obligation to listen and act on everything they say? You don't. There are respectful ways to indicate that you hear them and will consider it without immediately taking action. If they ask you about it later in a follow-up session you can say – we considered your advice carefully, but don't believe that is the right direction for our company right now. I have never seen a mentor get bent out of shape by this approach. And if they do, they are probably not someone you want to work with anyway – no one is right 100% of the time.

We had a mentor at Blue Startups that was getting very dogmatic about the advice he was giving. If he felt the entrepreneur was not listening to him, he got very upset and vented to me and others about the situation. After seeing this pattern of behavior play out several times, we politely asked him to resign as a mentor at Blue Startups. Know one needs the kind of advice that comes with strings and egos attached.

Maintain your vision (with flexibility)

It is a hard balance to strike but this is what all entrepreneurs must strive for: vision with tweaks. If you swing broadly from one approach to another, your team, advisors and investors will begin to distrust your instincts with the company. And trust is the most important thing you can build with your network. And once you have lost trust it is very hard to get back. So, stay true to your vision for your company. Listen to others, but be committed to certain truths about your company.

Our most successful entrepreneurs have been willing to adjust their businesses along the way, but have always stayed true to their essential vision. I have seen many entrepreneurs stray from their vision so far, based on other people's advice, only to return to their original concept. The only difference is that they have now lost precious time and momentum.

Cure your mentor whiplash

Not all advice is created equal and not all mentors are right all of the time. The cure for mentor whiplash is to always listen and consider but only act upon that advice that rings true for you at that time. Action should only be taken when it aligns with your customer needs, team input and your own long-term vision for the company.

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