Why You Need a Strong Network of Mentors — and How to Build an Effective One

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The old saying, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know” is an incredibly vague statement. The assumption behind this statement is that your professional network has the opportunity to supercharge your career prospects, and it’s well-documented that who you choose to spend your time with can ultimately influence and define how successful or unsuccessful you will be in achieving your outcomes. However, I personally found it difficult to establish a process around how to engage with folks in my network, specifically those I define as my mentors.

Mentors can play just as important of a role in our personal and professional development; however, they’re different from therapists, executive coaches or startup advisors because there isn’t necessarily a transactional element to your relationship, which removes any obligations or expectations around how to engage with these individuals.

Here are a few observations I’ve made as I established my own network of mentors, as well as reflections on how I can give back to be a stronger mentor to others.

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Build the scaffolding

Defining your personal values will set the foundation, or the mentorship scaffolding, for any relationships you build. To get to the root of these values, I decided to reflect on two meta questions before I started seeking out mentors.

1. What is my ultimate purpose?
2. What outcome(s) am I striving for in my personal and professional life?

Here's what I wrote down: *"To build and live a life that is fun, fulfilling, and meaningful for my family, myself, and those I love most."* Relationships are at the core of my ultimate purpose, and balance across personal and professional aspects of my life is critical to living out that purpose. Upon drafting the purpose statement, I listed out each of the main categories that I've elected to prioritize and put energy into that align with that purpose. For me, those categories are: *professional, financial, personal development, family, friends, health and spirituality*.

Each of those categories has specific time-based outcomes that I'm striving for, which often change and evolve as I learn and grow. However, with that scaffolding in place, you have the foundation to find individuals who align with your personal values statement and the categories you want to improve upon.

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Create a process

I'm a firm believer that you can learn from anyone; However, I'm also of the mind that you should strive to create structure and focus on who you're connecting with and whether they align with your purpose statement and the categories

you've defined above.

I've thought about the structure of my mentorship network in three layers

1. **Ballers:** The people I aspire to be one day
2. **Ballers in waiting:** The people I aspire to be that I'm currently working for
3. **Ballers in training:** The people I respect and admire that I'm working with.

In total, that could be as many as 21 different people when you factor this across three layers and seven different categories of focus. Twenty-one people is a lot of individuals to build meaningful relationships with! So, in order to make my process more sustainable, I've worked to consolidate certain categories under individual mentors where that person can support my development across multiple domains.

This group is fluid as my outcomes and priorities change, as well as which categories of my life I'm spending more or less time focused on. I proactively seek to have three individuals of each category that I connect with on a quarterly basis.

If I'm unable to connect with any of these individuals over the course of the year, I ensure that there's at least one annual touchpoint with everyone that I've established a relationship with. For me, this is an annual holiday newsletter where I share an update on progress against my outcomes over the year. This has also served as a great way to help initiate conversations in areas where I may need support, almost like an annual investor update, without the expectation that I need to cut them a fat check or send shareholder paperwork!

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Hold yourself accountable

Once you've committed to building the scaffolding and initiating these relationships across various categories of your personal and professional life, it really helps to create systems of accountability for yourself as a mentee AND mentor.

As a mentee, I highly recommend joining or creating a mastermind with the folks in your mentor network of influence (i.e., founders, entrepreneurs, parents). During my time building my startup, I joined a mastermind with four other entrepreneurs I respected (a.k.a. Ballers in training). As part of the mastermind, we created an accountability structure where members needed to attend at least three out of four meetings each month. If a member missed more than one meeting for two consecutive months, they were replaced in the mastermind.

As a mentor, I believe focus is critical. I previously signed up for almost six different startup mentorship networks and was providing value in absolutely NONE of them. I've made it a priority to pick ONE community of founders that I can support in what I've learned to give back to mentors. Communities like Chief, Hampton and Pavilion offer new ways of building new relationships across cohorts of like-minded, ambitious professionals.

Additionally, I block off three hours on Friday afternoons when mentees from that community can book time with me to talk about their business challenges. Most importantly, I don't have strings attached to these Friday meetings. I'm not expecting founder equity or charging for this time as a startup advisor or consultant.

In summary, I'm grateful for the entrepreneurs, coaches, therapists, advisors and parents that have offered to spend their time with me, as well as the individuals who have trusted me with theirs. I hope that these principles are as

useful for you as they were for me. And if they’re not, well, then I clearly need a mentor for mentorship frameworks. So, if you know of anyone, hit me up!

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