



YOU WANT TO BE AN  
AMAZING LEADER?

# BE A MENTOR

The unseen benefits of mentoring  
relationships for mentors and mentees

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**By: Gina Riley**

**“THE MORE YOU DEVELOP YOUR CAREER, YOU NEED MORE OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE – NOT LESS”**



LISA FAIN

CEO, CENTER FOR MENTORING EXCELLENCE

As a senior leader, is mentorship missing in your professional development? Are you a mentor now? Do you have mentors yourself?

Mentorship is relevant at each career stage and integral to professional development no matter your level in an organization. If designed with purpose, the mentor and mentee relationship is proven to be mutually beneficial for senior leaders and professionals early in their careers.

I welcome you to read my interview with Lisa Fain as we explore the reasons why we never outgrow the need for mentorship as well as the benefits one experiences mentoring others in later stages of one's career.

Lisa Fain is the CEO of the Center for Mentoring Excellence, an expert in mentoring and inclusion, a global speaker, and an executive coach. The Center for Mentoring Excellence provides facilitation, training, and guidance to organizations of all sizes around the globe to help them create more inclusive cultures through mentoring. A former employment attorney, Fain was formerly Senior Director of the diversity and inclusion function at Outerwall Inc. (former parent company to automated retail giants Redbox and Coinstar).

### **LET'S START WITH THIS – WHAT IS A MENTOR?**

A mentor is not a 'sage on the stage who tells you what your journey should be based on what they have accomplished. Instead, a mentor is a 'guide on the side' and facilitator of learning who helps you determine where your best developmental path is and provides additional perspective. They invest in your learning and development by creating a reciprocal relationship.

### **WHY DO LEADERS NEED MENTORS IN THE LATER STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS?**

While I think it is obvious why those early in their career might need a mentor, I would say one never outgrows the need for one. Notice I have not mentioned a mentor needs to be somebody senior to you? The more you develop your career, you need more outside perspective – not less. You need somebody to ask if you've considered other viewpoints. Mentors share what has worked for them and challenge you to think through who else you could talk with to gain a better perspective.

## WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THIS IS THAT IT HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED FOR MENTORS WITH DIFFERENT FUNCTIONAL AREAS OF EXPERTISE OR PEOPLE IN OTHER INDUSTRIES.

Absolutely! I think peer mentoring is incredibly powerful. I'm excited about the idea of what we call Complementary Mentoring. Many people call it reverse mentoring, but I'm not a fan of the term because I think there's an implicit suggestion in the word 'reverse' - because a junior person might be able to mentor someone senior. Both people in a mentoring relationship have something to offer to each other. In Complementary Mentoring, mentors offer intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and intercultural perspectives that create a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A MENTOR, A SPONSOR, AND A COACH?

With mentoring, I think about three characteristics. There is reciprocity, learning, and co-creation. Reciprocity is where both mentors and mentees each benefit and have a relationship focused on learning. Co-creation means that both parties create the terms of the relationship together. The job of a mentor is to invest in the mentee's development in a way that is reciprocal and creates a safe space where the mentee can share the challenges they are working on and where they want to develop.

A sponsor's job is to be an advocate or a champion for the sponsee (sometimes called the protégé) when they are not in the room and to help create exposure to opportunities. It's not that a mentor can't create exposure to opportunities, but it's not their explicit function in the way it is for a sponsor.

Mentees need a safe space to share all their problems and challenges so they can seek help and guidance to work through them. This enables them to hitch their wagon up to a sponsor so they can advocate for them. Many mentees don't want to show up for a sponsor sharing all their warts because they might not be as receptive to advocate for them. In fact, it can compromise the function of a sponsor and lessen the likelihood that they will champion them for new opportunities. That said, a mentor can and should create opportunities for exposure for their mentees, too.

Having mentors and sponsors is important, but one person does not need to serve both functions. It is particularly important and critical for people who have been traditionally

marginalized in the workplace to find a sponsor who can be a champion for their advancement because these sponsorship relationships happen less organically.

I am most asked about the differences between a mentor and a coach, and I say they are sisters or cousins to each other. All mentors are coaches, but not all coaches are mentors. Coaches use the skill of appreciative inquiry, which is the skill of asking questions and curiosity. Also, coaching is not necessarily a reciprocal relationship. Mentoring is driven by the mentee and is about learning and development based on a particular performance element. Coaching is driven by the coach and the coachee's needs. The coach brings the tools and process, whereas the mentoring process is more about co-creation.

## I'VE NOTICED PEOPLE STRUGGLE WITH HOW TO IDENTIFY A MENTOR AND ASK FOR A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP. WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND TO PEOPLE TO OVERCOME THIS MENTAL HURDLE?

The struggle often comes from people asking the question "Who?" before they ask the question "What?" Don't start by asking who should be your mentor. The first question is "What do I want to learn?" Steer clear of being attracted to a personality over learning needs. You might cut off possibilities that could be fruitful. Think about who would be a great learning fit.

All this requires introspection. Think about what you want to learn and then back into the qualities you want in a mentor. Then, ask yourself, "Whom might I know who might fulfill those qualities?" or "Whom might I know who could introduce me to the right people?"

The other thing that intimidates people is how to make the ask. The answer is you don't do that initially, just like you don't ask somebody to marry you on the first date. People love to be asked for their expertise! Let them know you want to learn about a specific area they've been successful in and if they would be willing to discuss it. Tell them you are trying to learn and educate yourself.

I don't recommend saying you are looking for a mentor right off the bat because the two of you have not determined if you are a good fit yet. You need to warm up the relationship a bit. Maybe follow up on the first conversation with a second. Let them know your takeaways and how you are putting them into practice. Ask if it is okay to follow up in a couple of months.



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ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING THINGS ABOUT A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP IS TO LEARN AND DEVELOP AN APPRECIATION OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

**THIS IS A GREAT TACTIC THAT HELPS PEOPLE DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS. I ADVISE A SIMILAR APPROACH FOR FOLKS TO NETWORK AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS VERSUS DIRECTLY TALKING ABOUT JOB OPPORTUNITIES. DON'T START BY HANDING YOUR RESUME OVER AND ASKING FOR TIME TO TALK.**

Some people may not be willing or able to engage in a coaching relationship. It is worth testing the waters first, which is less intimidating. This means you will not find a mentor tomorrow, and it will take some introspection, planning, and work before you start this process.

### **WHAT SHOULD A MENTEE SEEK IN THE RELATIONSHIP?**

Mentees need to first establish the guardrails for the relationship. How often do you want to meet? Every couple of weeks? Monthly? What will you talk about? What are your expectations? Will you meet at a convenient coffee shop or do a walk and talk? You will need to clarify this, so you both know what you anticipate getting from the relationship.

This exercise will help a mentee make a specific ask when they approach a prospective mentor to formalize the mentoring relationship.

This is not a drive-by conversation; instead, it's one with purpose and measurable progress against stated goals. Ask your mentor how you can determine if the mentoring relationship is successful. I like to say that you keep the main thing the main thing. Keep learning and goal achievement at the forefront. The primary purpose of the mentoring relationship is development.

### **HOW DOES ONE ENCOURAGE A PROSPECTIVE MENTOR TO INVEST TIME IN YOU? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR THE MENTOR?**

The benefit for mentors is that they have an opportunity to enhance their leadership and communication skills. Sometimes, mentees will think they are burdening their mentor; however, if the relationship is developed properly and best practices are implemented, the mentor will gain as much or more than the mentee. The data shows mentors become better leaders, gain additional perspective, and have greater career satisfaction.

How do you encourage a prospective mentor to say yes? Be somebody who takes ownership of the relationship, owns their learning, is willing to be reflective, and steps out of their comfort zone.

When we train mentees, we say there are four things that mentors want to see in their perspective mentees. They want to know they're ready to learn. They want to know they are open and trusting. They want to know they are willing to step out of their comfort zone. And finally, they want to know they are a good listener.

There are many ways to demonstrate all four things and show a prospective mentor you are worth the investment.

**IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU NEED TO BE READY TO EXPLAIN HOW YOU WILL SHOW UP ON THE FRONT END, MAKING IT CLEAR WHAT THEY MIGHT BE GETTING INTO. THAT MAKES SO MUCH SENSE.**

### **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A MENTEE VERSUS A MENTOR?**

The mentee drives the relationship and needs to be learning and following up. No mentor wants to chase after their mentee, and nobody knows better the needs of the mentee than the mentee themselves. Some mentees might say they don't know where they want to go; however, the answer is still within you, not the mentor.

So, what is the role of a mentor? Ask great questions, be a great listener, and be ready to learn alongside the mentee. You won't have all the answers. Many mentors feel a little nervous about not having all the answers to mentees' questions. Your job is to share your perspective, knowing it is not the whole truth. Mentors need to set the tone for sharing, being vulnerable, and being willing to co-create the terms of the mentoring relationship.

### **YOUR BOOK BRIDGING DIFFERENCES FOR BETTER MENTORING DESCRIBES FOUR PHASES OF A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP. WOULD YOU WALK ME THROUGH THE PHASES?**

First, I want to credit my co-author, Lois Zachary, for creating this model, which she first introduced in her book *The Mentor's Guide*, years ago. We just completed a Third Edition of that book together. The first phase is preparation and getting yourself ready for the relationship. Take time for self-awareness and connection. I like to say connection before content. Don't dive right in. Meet first, get to know each other, and set some initial goals. You need to build a relationship so that you can be vulnerable together.

The next phase is negotiating the terms of the mentoring relationship. Sometimes, we get pushback on the term negotiation because it sounds awfully legalistic and formal. But that term is important because what we are talking about is making an agreement. You are co-creating your terms of working together. What will this relationship look like? What are your ground rules for success? What are the logistics, boundaries, and confidentiality agreements? What are the goals we will work towards?

Some people struggle with this because it feels overly formal, yet if you miss this, you are very likely to have your relationship go off track because you have not set the parameters for working together.

### **IT SOUNDS VERY FOUNDATIONAL.**

It is! Many people feel like they should be able to be more casual, and they don't need to do this step. I've talked to many people whose relationships have fizzled or gone off track, and I ask them to revisit their agreements. They usually say they didn't create them in the first place or forgot about them.

The next phase is enabling growth, which is a goal-getting phase of the mentoring cycle, and this is the heart of the relationship.

Finally, there is the closure phase, which people often skip, and their relationship fizzles. Closure isn't necessarily about closing out the relationship; rather, it's a closure conversation about accomplishments and what you have both learned over the course of the year—thanking each other for investing time in the relationship and maybe having a celebration of sorts for coming across a finish line. Then, you may decide to continue the relationship, which takes you back to phase one.

### **HOW DO MENTEES PREPARE AND PLAN FOR MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS? WHAT IS THE MENTEE'S ROLE? WHAT ARE WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS?**

Set an agenda, take notes to remember what happened the last time, and stay focused on your goals. I also encourage mentees to finish each meeting with takeaways and commitments. What did you learn during the mentoring session? What are you committing to doing before you meet again? Send the meeting notes and a recap of your takeaways to your mentor and thank them for the session.

Preparation is key. Don't come to a mentoring meeting and say I don't have much to talk about today. Spend time on your goals and take the time to prepare for mentoring conversations. Mentees need to drive this.



**“ PEOPLE WILL BE WILLING TO INVEST IN THEIR OWN LEARNING IF THEY SEE YOU DOING IT, TOO. LEADERS NEED TO MODEL THIS BEHAVIOR. ”**

## WHAT ARE WAYS THE MENTEE CAN OFFER FEEDBACK TO THEIR MENTOR?

I want to emphasize that feedback doesn't need to be negative so long as it is specific and helps a mentor improve as a leader.

## HOW CAN MENTORS AND MENTEES CO-CREATE A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP?

I recommend connecting in ways that help you find similarities, get to know your differences, and be curious about each other. This trust-building process takes time and doesn't all happen in the first meeting. Sometimes, we recommend mentors and mentees use a power question which is a deeper question both will ask and answer. We've got a list of power questions you can download for free on our website ([www.centerformentoring.com](http://www.centerformentoring.com)).

Also, showing up prepared and demonstrating you care about the relationship is essential. Build trust by reflecting on what you have learned. Maintain confidentiality. Stay in the relationship between meetings. Send a text or email and share information you think would be of interest to them.

## WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE EYE TO EYE WITH PEOPLE. WHAT ARE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO MENTORS AND MENTEES TO BRIDGE GAPS OR APPROACHES BASED ON OUR WORLDVIEW?

Lead with curiosity. Ask them to share their thinking process. You could say that you are struggling to understand a

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particular perspective and would love to hear theirs. Ask what led them to their conclusions, and do not try to create an argument. You don't have to convince your mentoring partner to believe in your worldview. One of the most exciting things about a mentoring relationship is to learn and develop an appreciation of different perspectives.

Demonstrate inclusive behavior. Acknowledge without judgment that your journey and your truth may not be their journey or their truth. Most of all, ask about and respect each other's worldviews. Some say worldviews and even political views are all rooted in values. So, if you learn more about people's values, you open an interesting conversation.

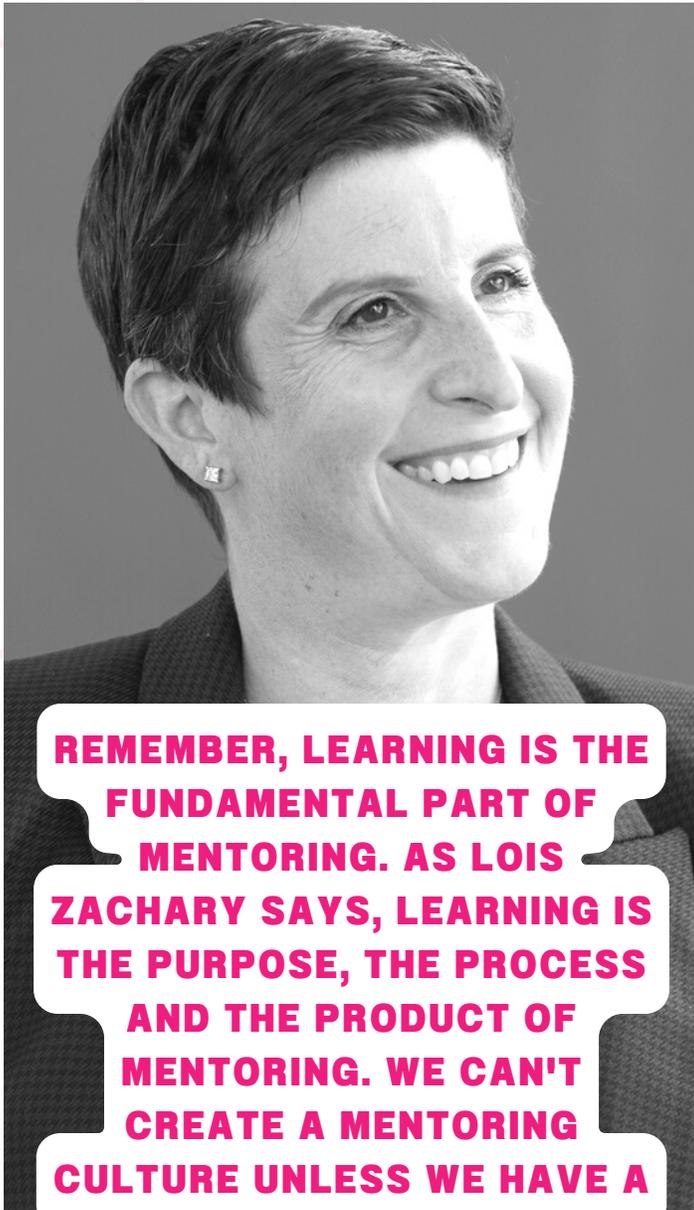
**I LOVE THAT. I BELIEVE VALUES ARE THE HEART SOURCE AND THE THING THAT ATTRACTS OR REPELS US IN CERTAIN SITUATIONS, HELPS US THRIVE, OR SUPPRESSES US FROM BEING OUR BEST SELVES.**

## WHAT IS A GOOD MEETING CADENCE THAT HELPS SUSTAIN MOMENTUM AND MAXIMIZE GROWTH?

Most mentoring relationships are nine to twelve months. It's helpful to start with biweekly meetings during the first two or three months and then reassess and switch over to monthly meetings. It would help if you met more frequently at first to gain momentum and establish a trusting relationship. Then, you can spread meetings out a little less frequently so that mentees have a chance to follow up on some of the commitments.

**I ADVISE PEOPLE TO CONSIDER HAVING MULTIPLE MENTORS OR DEVELOP A PERSONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS TO GET A DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT AND PERSPECTIVES. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?**

I think having multiple mentors is important, but takes a lot of intentionality. You can have different mentors throughout your personal and professional life because there are many ways for us to develop ourselves. It is also great to have a sponsor. Absolutely assemble a board of advisors and people who are invested in your growth in different ways and can add different perspectives. It is so worthwhile to invest in your learning.



**REMEMBER, LEARNING IS THE FUNDAMENTAL PART OF MENTORING. AS LOIS ZACHARY SAYS, LEARNING IS THE PURPOSE, THE PROCESS AND THE PRODUCT OF MENTORING. WE CAN'T CREATE A MENTORING CULTURE UNLESS WE HAVE A LEARNING CULTURE.**

**I WONDER WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO A PERSON IN THEIR TWENTIES IF THEY TOOK THIS APPROACH AND THOUGHT ABOUT MENTORSHIP IN THIS WAY. WHAT IF THEY WERE MORE STRATEGIC ABOUT WHO THEY WANTED TO LEARN FROM AND WHAT THEY WANTED TO LEARN? IT WOULD BE AN INCREDIBLE SET OF BUILDING BLOCKS TO PROPEL THEM THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS.**

Yes! And nurturing those relationships over time. I think back to how I handled or didn't handle those relationships in my twenties and thirties. I treated them as if they were transactional. There were people I wanted to learn from, so we had one or two meetings, which was the end of it. I can see that I squandered some relationships in those early years of my career because I wasn't forward thinking about nurturing those relationships and what a difference it could have made.

**I'VE HAD THE SAME THOUGHTS. I LOOK BACK AND THINK ABOUT HOW IMPORTANT CERTAIN PEOPLE WERE TO MY DEVELOPMENT, BUT I DID NOT KEEP IN TOUCH. IT IS A SHAME.**

**HOW CAN LEADERS DEVELOP A CULTURE OF MENTORING?**

Remember, learning is the fundamental part of mentoring. As Lois Zachary says, learning is the purpose, the process, and the product of mentoring. We can't create a mentoring culture unless we have a learning culture.

There are many ways to create a mentoring culture within an organization. The primary or pivotal way is to invest in and encourage learning among the people in your organization. What are the leaders doing to invest in their learning, and how are they sharing they are doing this? People will be willing to invest in their learning if they see you doing it, too. Leaders need to model this behavior.

Then I would ask, how are you holding your people accountable for what they are learning? Are they sharing it? You can also add these investments to people's performance reviews. Are you honoring, appreciating, and publicly celebrating developmental milestones in all-hands meetings or other company communications? Another thing companies can do is set up the expectation that leaders will also be mentors.



## HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOOD MENTORING AND GOOD MANAGEMENT?

There is a lot of overlap between the skills of mentors and managers.

Good mentoring is both a role and a skill. Good managers should have mentoring skills, which are the investment in and development of people. This requires being curious and open to new perspectives. Ultimately, managers are accountable for their team's performance and the organization's success in what they are trying to deliver.

When we restrict mentoring relationships to only our manager or our vertical, we risk not recognizing the true developmental needs of people on the team. Those needs might be met with perspectives externally or from another vertical. Also, some employees might find it challenging to be mentored by their manager and feel vulnerable because they evaluate them.

## ANY OTHER TOP TIPS OR TAKEAWAYS?

Let's go back to the board of advisors because I think it is something we are both passionate about. If you are wondering who needs to be on your board of advisors, first think about the various roles you play in your life and what you want to learn in each of those areas. It starts with self-awareness, and this is a great reflection exercise before setting out to find a mentor. Perhaps you are a parent, a spouse, an entrepreneur, and a thought leader in your industry. You might want to develop yourself in each of these areas.

I haven't followed this tip for myself lately, but I'm going to as soon as we're done with this conversation!

Also, remember it is a relationship and not a transaction. Use your relationship development skills and help a mentor see that it would be a good investment of time and benefit them, too.



## WHAT IS NEXT FOR YOU, LISA, AND HOW CAN PEOPLE REACH YOU?

The 3rd edition of *The Mentor's Guide* came out on June 15, 2022, and I am super proud of it. We are spending a lot of time getting the word out. It is a handbook for mentors and program administrators to help make the most of mentoring relationships.

We also have a book that came out in 2020 called *Bridging Differences for Better Mentoring*. I spend a lot of time talking to organizations about how to create inclusive work environments through mentoring.

These books and more resources can be found on our website at [CenterForMentoring.com](https://CenterForMentoring.com). You can also find a spot there to download a list of power questions that will help you connect with your mentoring partner.

I'm also on all social media handles.

## CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



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