

To succeed in the 'women's world,' seek a mentor's help... or become one

By Lisa Purichia

We all hold dreams of how our entrepreneurial endeavors will turn out, and every person paints their own individual portrait of what success should look like.

For some, that might be starting their own company from scratch and building it from the ground up. It might entail reaching a certain level of market share or monetary success. Sometimes it's as simple as coming up with a unique, original idea and seeing it through to becoming a viable product in the marketplace. These dreams can be helpful in providing that visionary zeal that helps drive us through the darker days of any challenging obstacles we might encounter.

But whether you're a young garage start-up or a senior manager in a large corporation, one of the tools I've found most helpful in achieving business success is developing a mentoring relationship, especially with other women. In seeking the best mentor, you shouldn't exclude any strong candidates just because they're men; but in my experience some of the most fruitful relationships can be with other businesswomen.

Finding the right female mentor presented a challenge in the early days of women entering the workforce in large numbers during the 1960s and '70s. Even today, the number of women in senior management or CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies lags. The business community needs more women in leadership roles.

The promising fact is that female entrepreneurs are thriving. Women-owned businesses now constitute more than 40 percent of all privately-held firms in the U.S., according to the Center for Women's Business Research. Between 1997 and 2006, businesses fully women-owned or majority-owned by women grew at almost twice the national rate (42.3 percent vs. 23.3 percent).

In searching for the right mentor, it might be best to consider one of these amazing women entrepreneurs. Business owners who have "been there, done that" are especially valuable as guides for younger or less experienced businesswomen.

Why recreate the wheel, or force yourself to smash up against the barriers to success if an experienced business owner can help you detour around those frustrations?

We are never too young or too old to ask for help. As entrepreneurs, we quickly discover that we must be constantly acquiring new skills and mastering existing ones in order to adapt to a challenging and ever-changing business climate.

In the same way, sometimes it can help for an older manager or company owner to reach across the generational divide to seek guidance from a person who is younger but nonetheless has experience or expertise in areas you do not. The mentor/mentee relationship is not always reflected as a sage old advisor tutoring an eager youth.

Sometimes, in fact, the very same mentoring relationship can flip around so the person who was giving the advice is now receiving it, and vice-versa!

An active mentor relationship should allow you access to an experienced business owner or manager on a regular basis, and should provide for regular face-to-face meetings – monthly or quarterly.

I would recommend you seek a mentor who has demonstrated the talent or skills you seek to enhance in yourself. Make it clear to them why you are seeking their help, and what you hope to gain out of the relationship. As a mentee, you should set personal goals to raise your performance to a higher level of effectiveness. If you are good at financial matters but need to improve your business development skills, seek a respected business owner/ manager who has a proven track record in creating and fostering new business and relationships.

Whatever your goals, seek a mentor who demonstrates excellence, so you can raise your own skill level.

When you are about to set off on a search for a mentor, be prepared for competition. In my experience, many successful women who are prime candidates for a mentoring relationship are very busy, and may already be mentoring other up-and-comers. Create a list of four to six candidates, analyze and rank them, and start at the top and go down.

In convincing someone to be your mentor, don't just talk about how it will help you. Lois Zachary, mentoring expert and author of *The Mentor's Guide*, tells those seeking advice to emphasize the benefits to the mentor. If both are part of the same organization, it could help the growth of the company. Mentoring could also help the mentor strengthen his or her own facilitation or management skills. And the idea of "paying it forward" remains a strong appeal to community-minded individuals who see helping businesswomen develop their skills as a positive benefit to all, Zachary says.

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