

GO HIRE YOURSELF A MENTOR

Mary P. Rowe

Mary P. Rowe

One of my major bits of advice for all women in nontraditional environments is to find themselves a mentor. A mentor can be of any race or sex or age. You do not have to like him or her; therefore you have a wide range of people to choose from, including both pleasant people and those you consider to be dinosaurs.

Often young people are told to find role models, preferably same-sex, same-race, likable ones, hopefully of the same sexual orientation and value structure. One is told to find this saint and then learn to be like her or him. Saints, however, are few, (especially same-sex, same-race, etc. ones). Therefore, it is easier to find a mentor. Even a dinosaur can be encouraged to be a mentor, just so long as she or he is competent.

A mentor is a person who comments on your work, criticizing errors and praising excellence. This person sets high standards and teaches you to set and meet high standards. A mentor teaches you how The System works. If you are in a hospital, or in industry, you learn the organization chart and also how the place really works. If you are in academe, you learn the organization chart and also how the place really works. Most important, you learn how to succeed in your studies, how to succeed in your work, how to get promoted.

Mentors teach you which intellectual problems are important and how to recognize them yourself. They apprentice you to proposal writing, conference presentations, resume construction. They introduce you to important networks, talk about your work to others, and find you jobs. Initially they are your evaluators and the linkage to other evaluators. They teach you finally how to set your own goals, how to evaluate yourself realistically and how to succeed.

Many women find it hard to acquire a mentor. Senior women are exhausted and occasionally jealous of their uniqueness. Senior men sometimes ignore women, or they advance on women as sex objects. Or they avoid women because they are sex objects and wives would complain. Junior women are often shy. What to do?

Nearly any competent person can be helped to become your mentor. I mean this of course, not in the Machiavellian, exploitative sense, but in the context of respectful, honest behavior on your part.

1. Take responsibility for finding a mentor. Introduce yourself; make the first contact - always on a professional subject. Go up after class, write a letter with a question, comment on his/her last article, send your articles to her/him in draft, for comment.
2. Do it again, respectfully and intelligently.
3. Begin to ask for help about your errors and excellence. Cherish the good advice you are given and tell your mentor how helpful she/he is. Say it even if she/he brushes it off or says "It was nothing." Too few people say thank you; most people only complain about grievances. Be sure you acknowledge all the help you are given.
4. See if you can apprentice yourself, as a research helper, teaching assistant, junior collaborator, proposal writer.
5. As you get to know your mentor, be friendly, open, and very professional. Get to know her or his spouse; introduce your own friends. Avoid sex with a mentor at all costs unless you plan marriage or are so good that nothing can hurt you. However, if sex does become part of the relationship keep yourself independent. If a lot of work is accomplished make sure you get credit for it, and try to be independent enough to move to another city to advance if necessary.

6. Ask advice about your career advancement. Be cheerfully careful to express your appreciation for every decent thing your mentor does. (Most competent professionals live in an inhuman environment and really appreciate decent behavior).
7. Do whatever you can to help your mentor forever after and give credit in public for the help you have gotten. This reinforces good behavior everywhere. It will encourage you to become a first-rate mentor. With care and practice, you may even become a good role model for mentors.

MARY P. ROWE is Special Assistant for Women and Work, Office of the President and Chancellor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ph.D., Columbia University.