

From a Mentee to a Mentor¹

Aina Aliieva

We didn't have mentorship programs when I started my career in Ukraine. Having been born in a post-Soviet Union country in an industrial city, my choices were very limited. I didn't even know the word "Mentor". Of course we had teachers, professors and bosses, yet these people weren't the right ones for me. I had an inner desire to meet someone but I couldn't even express who I was looking for.

I was lucky. My first boss became my mentor. We didn't refer to our relationship as a "Mentorship" since we didn't know this word. However, she taught me a lot and I still remember her advice.

Unfortunately, my first mentorship didn't last long. Due to very sad circumstances, I lost my boss and got another job. The new job environment was very different. Nobody cared about me. I was desperately looking for someone who could provide me with a relationship similar to what I had with my previous boss but this didn't happen. On the one hand, I wanted to become independent, learn how to make decisions and mitigate risks. On the other hand, I wanted to feel safe and comfortable and just have someone tell me what to do and what is right. Do you sense the irony?

I struggled. I had the feeling that I was inventing the bicycle while everybody else was driving a car. I knew that "bicycles" existed but no one could show them to me. I kept inventing. I invented "triangular wheels" and made many other mistakes until I created the first more or less useful "bicycle". I knew that I suffered and put in so much effort for nothing. It would have been much easier and quicker if someone just gave me directions!

Time passed. I moved to Canada. Here I was introduced to a proper mentorship program. I felt so good! Finally, someone to teach me! I thought the only thing I needed was to find a good mentor and then I would easily figure out what to do with my life and my career would skyrocket. You probably already guessed what happened next. I found my mentor but our relationship didn't work. In my mind, the Mentor was like a Prince on a White Horse; a knowledgeable and powerful person who would save me from my doubts, routines and struggles. Sheryl Sandberg said a very good phrase: "we need to stop saying, "get a mentor and you will excel." Instead, we need to say, "Excel and you will get a mentor".

Eventually, I came to understand what these relationships were about. I applied for different programs, met great people and had awesome mentors. I understood what I wanted, received certifications and grew professionally. And last year for the first time in my life, I became a mentor myself. It was so thrilling and exciting!

¹ How to cite this article: Aliieva, A. (2020). From a Mentee to a Mentor; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June.

So, what it means to me to be a Mentor:

1. Being a mentor is about asking smart questions, not having all the answers. Also, being a mentor is about suggesting, not instructing.

It doesn't matter how smart or experienced the person is. One person simply can't have the answer to everything. And that is normal. Rather than thinking that as a mentor you just need to provide answers, a much better way is to ask your mentee the right questions and let him/her work on answers and grow. The student never learns without putting some effort into digging for the answers.

2. You are a mentor, not a mother

This was the hardest lesson for me because it was so tempting to me to take my protégés under my wing and provide them with endless love and care. I had to learn how to resist mothering because if I didn't, the outcome was a blurring of roles and responsibilities. This hurts the mentee and degrades his/her sense of agency and accountability. And it hurts me as well because this costs me emotionally and this situation eats up a lot of my mental energy.

3. Being a mentor means being a filter

Having Google as the main source of knowledge and information, it becomes so tempting to say: "Just Google it!" However, if 30 years ago we were struggling to find at least some information, nowadays we are struggling because there is too much information and it might take years to find what fits our needs. So, being a mentor means that I already have some expertise and have done some research. So, rather than telling my poor protégé to dig through tons of information and figure out what sources work the best for him/her, why not become a filter and save your mentee time for something more useful than just filtering through unnecessary information.

4. Not all mentorships end with a sense of satisfaction.

Sometimes people just don't match and it is normal.

5. On the other hand, being a mentor can result in a lifelong relationship.

How do you know if mentoring is for you?

1. Answer the question: why do you want to do this?

My answer is: I am so grateful to my mentors, so I want to pay it back. I had my chance and I want to give it to others. And like Oprah says: "I mentor when I see something and say, "I want to see that grow."

2. What is your expertise?

It is very noble to help others but before giving a person hope, it is better to ask yourself: do I have enough expertise to do that? The best way of doing this is to list all of your expertise in advance, then talk to a potential mentee and see if your expertise is what this person needs.

3. Do you have the empathy to distinguish the True goals of your protégé?

You can't imagine how many times people have asked me to help them develop public speaking or presentation skills! However, their True desire was to gain confidence.

4. Are you willing to spend time in a mentorship process?

It happened to me a couple of times and I heard a lot of stories about mentors who just disappeared at the beginning or in the middle of the program and stopped replying to emails and texts. First of all, this behaviour is not professional. You gave your promise, so you need to keep it. Secondly, think about your schedule in advance and make sure that you have space for your protégé. Life is unpredictable, so in case your plans change, just let your protégé know.

And in the end, what Mentorship means to me

Mentorship is building your protege's muscle memory so that their actions can later be performed without thinking. It is eyes and ears and another level of awareness. A mentor helps his/her mentee to break his/her actions down and help to build them again. Sometimes like in sports, the mentor sees the wrong moves of his/her apprentice and just places him/her in the corner, so these wrong moves are blocked.

Words and knowledge are not enough. Practice, observation and creativity in helping your protégé to correct him/her-self, this is what being a great mentor is all about. Teaching imparts knowledge, but it doesn't always provide the confidence that comes from experience. As a mentor, your goal is to help your mentee become a better professional through guided experience.

About the Author



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Aina Aliieva is a Scrum Master with 4 years of experience in Project Management and 4 years in an Agile environment. She is also CEO and instructor in Bee Agile Tutoring. <https://beeagile.org/> She teaches Project Management, Agile and goal setting for organizations around the world. She has managed and consulted on projects for the technical, construction, and engineering disciplines.

Aina has a Masters's degree in electrical engineering and an MBA in technology. She has PMP and PMI-ACP certificates.

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Aina is an experienced public speaker and coach. She also helps in personal planning and setting up goals.

In her free time, Aina participates in different mentorship programs, speaks at webinars and interviews people for her personal blog.

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