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INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has ever wondered about how to find a job, change jobs, get better projects or assignments, manage time, make decisions, gain better work-life balance, or build better relationships at work could benefit from mentoring. And this list does not include all the possible ways a mentor can help. At some point (usually multiple points) in our careers, everyone needs guidance, advice, new skills, or re-directing. That is, we need a mentor.

I have had several mentors in my life. Some knew that they were mentoring me; other times, I was learning new skills or behaviors from someone, without ever declaring the relationship as mentoring.

~Peggy Hutcheson
WHAT IS MENTORING?

There is no single, universally-accepted, definition of mentoring. The word can be traced back to Greek mythology—when Odysseus placed his son, Telemachus, in Mentor’s hands, while he was away waging the Trojan War. Mentor became Telemachus' teacher, trusted advisor, friend and protector. Today, anyone who has responsibility for helping someone else’s development, especially in the area of career development, may be called a mentor. Most often, contemporary descriptions of mentoring include words such as trust, advise, or guide. The mentor is anyone who is willing to use his or her wisdom, experience, or expertise to help someone else develop.

Although the Mentor in Greek mythology involved a long-term relationship, today a mentor may be short- or long-term. Sometimes these relationships are for designated periods—often one or two years in formal, corporate mentorship programs. Other times, they are less formal, and continue only until a specific goal is achieved. And still other times, the mentoring relationship develops into a lifelong friendship.

People often wonder how mentoring differs from coaching. Sometimes, the terms are used interchangeably. Often, however, coaching is about a specific situation that needs to be addressed, or a skill that needs to be developed. Mentoring is more growth-oriented—more about helping the whole person develop—to make the most of their opportunities, and to meet their goals.

In mentoring, one size does not fit all. You may think of a mentor as a more senior leader in your organization—someone who has some special talents or experience that you want to learn from, or someone you believe can open doors for you. In fact, in today’s fast-moving world, it is not unusual for someone to have more than one mentor to help fill more than one need.