

# Seven Habits of Highly Effective Mentors

How to make the most of being a mentor.

By [Jennifer Przybylo & Nina Vasan](#) | 6 | Jun. 3, 2013

**T**he concept of a mentor was introduced to us by Homer: In *The Odyssey*, on the eve of his epic voyage, Odysseus leaves his son Telemachus in the care of his trusted friend, Mentor. It is later revealed that Mentor is actually Athena—goddess of wisdom, inspiration, skill, and strategy—in disguise.

Mentors, whether professors or practitioners, play a critical role in the personal and professional development of individuals—in the nonprofit world and beyond. They are also invaluable to society as a whole, as the insight and practical experience they provide pave the roads to success for future generations, enabling them to explore new ground and take on new challenges more swiftly by avoiding some the journey's initial stumbling blocks.

As students, we are fortunate enough to encounter potential mentors on a regular basis. Our experience engaging with possible mentors has ranged from never getting a reply, to getting an introductory email, to learning to count someone as family. What turns an advisor or boss into a trusted mentor, someone whom others turn to for wisdom, inspiration, skill, and strategy? What can you do to maximize your effectiveness as a mentor? Below we present—from the perspective of a mentee—seven habits of highly effective mentors:

**1. Humanize yourself.** Sometimes the impressive titles on your desk and the awards on your wall can make you seem pretty intimidating, discouraging us from speaking frankly about our problems or asking questions we fear will seem silly. We wouldn't be meeting with you if we didn't already respect and admire you, so don't be afraid to admit your own stumbling blocks. Make yourself more relatable by sharing a big mistake you made, a regret you have, or something you'd do differently in hindsight. Such a confidence makes it easier for us to admit our own struggles and helps us see that failures are natural pit stops on the road to success. Step off the pedestal we've placed you on, and remind us that even the Greek gods could be fallible like mortals.

**2. Make regular appearances.** Just as constellations offered ancient civilizations comfort with their seasonal presence, you give us reassurance when you check in with us periodically. Sometimes we hesitate to contact you until we have something big to report. Make an effort to keep in touch, especially if you haven't heard from us

in a while. An unsolicited email with a link to an article of interest and a line asking how we're doing is a thoughtful and easy way to reach out. One of Jennifer's mentors makes a point to wish her happy birthday every year via Facebook or a quick email. It is a small but powerful gesture that makes him stand out.

**3. Provide balanced feedback.** Once you feel you've gotten to know us, give us honest feedback about our performance and personality. This is valuable insight that you are in a unique position to offer. One of Nina's most influential mentors is like a coach. When Nina was having a hard time, this mentor told her that she believed in Nina's potential and listed qualities she saw as her strengths. She shared a few things Nina hadn't identified, and her encouragement changed the way she thought about herself. Even more empowering is this mentor's constructive feedback. She told Nina not only how she could improve, but also gave her specific, actionable recommendations for how to do so. She anticipated the hurdles Nina might face and provided strategies for how to best tackle them.

**4. Ask for something in return.** No good relationship is one-sided. You are giving a lot to your mentees, and while many mentors consider the feel-good nature of mentoring reward enough, don't hesitate to ask your mentee for a favor or two. For example, if you're a professor, perhaps your student mentee can write to the Dean about how much she enjoyed your class, advise incoming students on how to make the most of a research internship with you, or serve on a department curriculum review committee to determine more effective ways of teaching the material. We're flattered to be asked and welcome the opportunity to show our gratitude.

**5. Foster community.** Establish a sense of community by inviting us and your other mentees to group get-togethers outside the office or classroom. This "behind-the-scenes" exposure to your world allows us to learn about the many other parts of your life you value beyond work, such as family, friends, and hobbies. Jennifer's mentor hosts a holiday party each year with his family, as well as periodic happy hours at local restaurants. His mentees always look forward to the chance to get to know students from different years, as well as the opportunity to spend time with our mentor outside a formal work setting. Jennifer was touched when another advisor invited her to share Thanksgiving with his family after learning she wasn't going to be able to fly home to see her own.

**6. Make introductions.** Just as companies have a board of directors to guide their growth, we benefit from developing a diverse board of mentors or a mentoring team. Like the pantheon atop Mount Olympus, a group of mentors can offer broad expertise and even create the opportunity for new partnerships. Encourage us to think critically about whose guidance can build on yours and address the other needs or facets of our life. Connect us with individuals you know, and ask us if there is anyone else we might like to meet. Make an email introduction, or even better, arrange a coffee break or lunch during which you can introduce us personally.

7. **Be a mentee.** Our experience as mentees has been the foundation for our own budding efforts as mentors. Everyone from the middle-school student to the most senior CEO can benefit from being both a mentor and a mentee. Continue investing in yourself and your own development.

Whether you're a seasoned mentor with many mentees or a new mentor just starting to cultivate your first mentoring relationship, keeping in mind these points will help ensure that both you and your mentees grow and strengthen as a result of your mentorship.



Jennifer Przybylo (left) is a student leader at Stanford Medical School. Nina Vasan (right) is a social entrepreneur and student at Harvard Medical School. Przybylo and Vasan are co-authors of the new book "**Do Good Well: Your Guide to Leadership, Action, and Social Innovation**," which was praised by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Muhammad Yunus as "the primer for social innovation."