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Mentors Help Small-Business Owners Develop Leadership Skills

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Deciding what direction to take a business is isolating for the owner of a small business — especially a sole proprietor. Relatives and friends can offer advice and opinions, but they often lack the expertise to provide the informed, objective counsel the entrepreneur needs.

That's when a mentor is handy. A mentor is both coach and sage — someone who's versed in the challenges of running a company and ready to share knowledge with others who need help with business strategies, resources and goals. The best mentors empathize with the people they're helping and aim to empower them to anticipate and overcome obstacles.

The junior partner in this arrangement isn't a passive disciple, and the mentor's word isn't gospel. But it's the mentee's responsibility to make the first move, direct the relationship and stay fully engaged in his professional development.

Identify scope and need: Some entrepreneurs need specific input for a limited time — maybe a discreet review of a business plan before it's taken to investors. Some want a long-term relationship with an industry insider who can guide them through high-tech product development. Women and minorities might want an adviser familiar with the race and gender barriers they encounter in the business world. No matter what the case, a business owner who knows what she wants from a mentor is more likely to find it.

Compatibility matters: Before beginning the search, the aspiring mentee should honestly evaluate his personal management style and openness to direction and constructive feedback. Without a willingness to trust the perspective of another person — sometimes a complete stranger — the entrepreneur might be unwilling to take risks based on the mentor's advice. After considering his own personality, the mentee can identify the qualities that matter most in a mentor.

Look around: The entrepreneur can search many places for a mentor. WESST — a New Mexico-based nonprofit small-business development and training network — is a great place to start, as WESST provides staff members to work face-to-face with clients. Industry and trade groups are also good places to meet people who might be willing to be mentors, and online communities link business people with experts all over the world.

Ground rules: The business owner should spend whatever time it takes to find the person who most matches her needs in terms of expertise, availability and personal chemistry. Both parties then should formalize the bond by discussing and agreeing on expectations, goals and boundaries. Mentor and mentee should decide how often to meet and under what circumstances the mentee can ask for help between meetings.

Mentoring in practice: If the relationship evolves into a fruitful one, the business owner should become increasingly confident about his developing skill and knowledge set and empowered by tangible growth in his leadership abilities. When the relationship reaches a natural end — when goals are met or in sight — both parties should discuss whether to make a clean break or maintain an informal collaboration.

WESST provides training, loans and support services to New Mexico small businesses from six statewide non-profit offices. To learn more, visit wesst.org.

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