

40 Questions to Ask a Mentor



By Jo Miller

I believe everyone has a personal mission, a reason for being on this planet.

Mine: to give leaders (like you!) a clear and proven plan for advancing your career and expanding your influence and impact—all by leveraging your authentic leadership strengths.

Based on my work with hundreds of thousands of women, I developed a powerful, pragmatic roadmap to guide you from where you are in your career to where you aspire to be.



I share this process in my #1 bestselling book [Woman of Influence: 9 Steps to Build Your Brand, Establish Your Legacy, and Thrive](#) (McGraw-Hill). The content in this guide has been adapted from the pages of that book.

Through my research, I've surveyed more than 3,000 professionals, the majority of whom were women. They have taught me about their strengths, passions, and aspirations, and the distinct ways we can often get bogged down on the path to realizing our leadership potential—situations that prevent us from being the leaders that we're capable of becoming.

I've also interviewed more than 150 executive women about the factors that contributed to their career and leadership development. From all of those conversations, I learned how they developed and used their strengths to blaze an uncompromising path into leadership.

One thing's clear: You can do the same.

Backed by all I have learned, I created this practical guide to help you attract and mobilize key members of your leadership support squad: your mentors. I'll break down four key types of questions to cover in every mentor conversation, with examples you can put to work immediately. I'll also cover how to find a mentor and how to reinvigorate a relationship with an existing mentor.

Let's get to work!

You don't have to make this climb alone.

Every leader needs a core group of strong connections to stay grounded. And every effective leader has their moment of realization about just how much more can be achieved by investing time in gathering the allies they need to thrive.

Who are you surrounding yourself with, and are they bringing out the best in you?

Mentors support your growth and development by providing advice, feedback, and guidance. They're the people you go to when you could use a confidence boost or sounding board for everyday situations, difficult problems, and almost any scenario in between.

The McKinsey Leadership Project has studied what drives and sustains the most successful female leaders. The project's authors pointed out that people with strong networks and good mentors enjoy more promotions, higher pay, and greater career satisfaction. (Who wouldn't want more of all three?)

Whichever way you look at it, these mentoring relationships are utterly essential to your success. And yet, of 1,200 aspiring leaders I surveyed, only 40 percent said they have an influential network of mentors and advocates supporting their career growth.

"You need to have mentors in your network who give you different types of feedback," says Amanda Martinez, group vice president of national replenishment and planning with Albertsons. "They should bring diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences."

Amanda, who has always worked in operations, has sought out mentors with other areas of expertise, such as human resources and retail. "The feedback I get from them is always surprising because they see the world differently than I do," she says.

Whether your objective is to advance your career, make a course correction, lead a major project, transform an organization, or make any type of bold, fearless move, having a diverse and influential circle of mentors makes the journey much, much easier.

Four Types of Questions to Ask a Mentor

I recommend asking your mentor four types of questions: stories, situations, self-awareness, and skill building.

Take one of each type to every mentoring conversation to keep things interesting, relevant, and valuable—for both of you.



★ 1. Stories

To kick-start the conversation, ask your mentor to tell a personal career story.

To get to the heart of your career objectives and concerns, make your questions as specific as possible, for example:

- Was there a time you messed up or felt like you'd failed? How did you recover?
- How did you learn to embrace risk taking?
- How did you become such a polished presenter?
- Which were the leadership skills you worked hardest to develop?
- Think back to five years ago. Did you envision this is where you would be?
- Tell me about a recent business setback. How did you recover?
- Was there ever a role you applied for and landed, but weren't 100% qualified to do? How did you proceed?
- What do you wish you had known before taking your first management role?
- Can you tell me about a time when you had a difficult boss? How did you handle the situation?
- What's the most important leadership lesson you've learned and how has it proven invaluable?

2. Situations

Now that the conversation is flowing, you can bring a specific situation to your mentor that you'd like help navigating. For example:

- Who are the people I need to align with in this organization to be successful?
- My boss said I need to be more strategic. What does that mean?
- I feel like my boss micromanages me. How can I change that dynamic?
- I tried to delegate a task last week, and it did not go as well as I'd expected. Can we work through what to do differently next time?
- How can I convince my manager to greenlight a stretch assignment?
- How can I stay connected to key influencers I don't have regular contact with?
- When trying to gain buy-in to implement a new program, what are some tactics that have worked for you?
- My performance review is coming up. What type of preparation do you most appreciate seeing from your employees?
- I have two very different career path options available to me. Can you weigh in to help me make a final decision?
- I am considering a career transition. What are some other areas of the business that might be a good fit for me?

3. Self-Awareness

One of the greatest strengths you can develop for yourself is the gift of self-awareness, meaning the ability to see yourself as others view you. A mentor's feedback can help you develop the strong internal compass for insightful and accurate self-evaluation. This feedback, if you're open to hearing it and even if it stings at first, can be one of the most powerful engines behind your development as a leader.

With self-awareness, you'll know when to strengthen an already positive perception, or when it's necessary to take steps to change any negative perceptions others have of you. Your mentor can assist by "holding up the mirror" and providing detailed feedback on how others see you. Ask questions such as these:

- How am I viewed—that is, what's my personal brand—in our organization?
- What do you see as my most important leadership strengths?
- What do you see as some of my blind spots?

- Do I come across as a strategic thinker in my day-to-day communication?
- How do people describe me when I'm not in the room?
- How I am viewed by leadership?
- Am I viewed as high-maintenance when I send my boss weekly status updates?
- How could I have communicated my idea more clearly?
- When I presented at the last meeting, how did I do?
- Did my communication style support the message I intended to deliver?

4. Skill Building

Is there a skill you're currently working to enhance? Ask your mentor for advice and resources that will help you polish that skill, with questions like these:

- How can I become better at influencing people who do not report to me?
- Can we role-play asking for a promotion and raise?
- Do you have any quick tips for reenergizing an overworked team?
- Can you recommend a book or resource for dealing with difficult conversations?
- Do you have a template you use for developing a long-range vision and plan?
- How can I become a more assertive negotiator?
- What practices are good for dealing with nervousness when speaking to groups?
- I have been asked to facilitate a team-building activity at a staff retreat. What are some keys to success?
- What's a good methodology or tool for project management and tracking team commitments?
- What new skills do I need to move ahead?

With these four types of questions, you'll never need to walk into another a mentoring session feeling unprepared. And you'll never sit through another conversation wondering if your mentor is finding the discussion interesting.

**Surround yourself with people who support you, advise you,
help you, and build you up.**

—Nithya Ruff, Head of the Amazon Open Source Program Office

Own It

Here are some actions you can take immediately to put these principles to work.

- Schedule your next check-in with a mentor.
- To make your approach truly strategic, focus on an important career or leadership goal before identifying the questions you'd like to ask.
- Prepare by creating one question from each of the four types (stories, situations, self-awareness, and skill building) using the Mentor Meeting Worksheet on page 9.
- If you're in need of additional inspiration, I've included lots of fill-in-the-blank prompts on page 10.

If you don't yet have a mentor, or if you have one already but the relationship seems to have run its course, here are some things to try.

You want to find a mentor

To find a mentor, start by identifying a role model: someone who inspires you.

Let the person know something you admire about them. Who doesn't love a compliment? Then request a 30-minute meeting to go over some career-related questions.

When you meet, bring one question from each of the four types (stories, situations, self-awareness, and skill building) that's relevant to one of your top career or leadership goals.

If that conversation goes well, you can ask to schedule a regular check-in. If the answer is "yes," you've found yourself a mentor.

From there, take responsibility for owning and directing the relationship:

- Set the agenda.
- Ask thoughtful questions (like the ones on the previous pages of this guidebook).
- Complete your agreed-upon tasks.
- Report your progress to your mentor.

Conversations with your mentor have gotten stale

Here's a common scenario: You approached someone you admire, boldly asked that person to mentor you, and got a "yes."

But a year into the relationship, those conversations don't invigorate you the way they used to, and you suspect they aren't as energizing for your mentor either.

Don't be too quick to write off the relationship. Sometimes it's not the relationship that's stale—you just need fresh material to discuss.

It's possible to reinvigorate your mentoring sessions by bringing a thoughtful, diverse slate of questions like the ones I've listed in the previous pages of this guidebook.

So rather than add a new mentor to your network, here's a different challenge:

- Recommit to the relationship.
- Reflect on whether your career or leadership goals have changed.
- Schedule a check-in with your mentor.
- Prepare by creating one question from each of the four types (stories, situations, self-awareness, and skill building) that are relevant to your current goals.

Pay it forward

Here's one final suggestion: Share the list of four types of questions with the people you mentor, and empower them to set the agenda in your future conversations.

**There's power in surrounding yourself with people who see the leader in you.
A strong network of supporters is key to accomplishing amazing things.**

—Georgene Huang, interim CEO of Scissero

Bonus Prompts for Inspiration

Now it's your turn. Use these fill-in-the-blank prompts to create new questions that address your most important career or leadership goals.



STORIES

Can you tell me about a time when you _____?
How did you learn to _____?
What do you wish you had known before _____?
What's the most important lesson you've learned about _____?
What's a challenge you've faced with _____? How did you handle it?



SITUATIONS

Can we work through what to do differently next time I _____?
How can I persuade my boss/stakeholder to _____?
When trying to _____, what tactics have worked for you?
What do you appreciate seeing from employees who are striving to _____?
I can't decide whether to _____ or _____. Can you help?



SELF-AWARENESS

What do you see as my strengths or blind spots in the area of _____?
Do I come across as _____ in my day-to-day communication?
How do _____ describe me when I'm not in the room?
I'd like to be known as _____. How can I build that perception?
Did my presentation or communication style support my intended message, which was _____?



SKILL-BUILDING

How can I become better at _____?
Can you recommend a good book, resource, tool, or methodology for _____?
I have been asked to _____. What are some keys to success?
Can we role-play _____?
What new skills do I need to _____?

Mentor Meeting Worksheet



STORIES

Start by asking your mentor to tell a personal career story. Target an area that addresses one of your career goals or concerns.



SITUATIONS

Once the conversation is flowing, ask a question about a specific situation you'd like your mentor's help with.



SELF-
AWARENESS

Ask a question that will enhance your self-awareness by soliciting detailed feedback on how you're perceived by others.



SKILL-
BUILDING

Ask your mentor for advice on how to polish a skill you're currently working to enhance.

Gather the allies you need to thrive

Let's face it: It isn't always easy to break out and establish yourself as an up-and-coming leader or thrive as you become more seasoned. But you don't have to do this alone.

There's power in surrounding yourself with people who inspire, challenge, and motivate you to make bold, fearless moves. A strong network of mentors is key to accomplishing amazing things.

Let's stay connected

I'd be honored to be part of your career support squad. Contact me at info@beleaderly.com if you have questions, or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#) to message me directly. If you'd like more resources like this one, subscribe to my newsletter at www.jomiller.com/newsletter.

Now go...become the powerhouse leader you were born to be!



P.S. For more on how to build an influential, supportive network of mentors, allies, and sponsors, refer to chapters 8 and 9 in my book, [Woman of Influence: 9 Steps to Build Your Brand, Establish Your Legacy, and Thrive](#) (McGraw-Hill).

P.P.S. Looking for a women's leadership expert to speak to your group? Learn more about my keynotes, workshops, webinars, and leadership programs at www.jomiller.com/speaking.