



# THE MENTOR MYTH

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HOW TO TAKE  
CONTROL OF YOUR  
OWN SUCCESS

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**DEBBY CARREAU**

"Practical, down-to-earth book . . . providing solid basic advice for those starting out or needing a boost." —*Library Journal*

**THE  
MENTOR  
MYTH**

"This book is an important resource for anyone trying to figure out how to have a fulfilling personal and professional life. Debby Carreau's unique perspective as a human resource consultant helps the reader think more clearly about how to create a career plan, manage their time, and get results."

—**Kim Keating,**  
**board member of Lean In**

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—**Jennifer Carlson,**  
**founder of Baby Gourmet**

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*To my family:  
Todd, Josh and Jenna, you make it all possible*



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# INTRODUCTION

## The Mentor Myth

**F**ind a mentor: this is often the beginning and the end of advice for professionals looking to grow their career. I have worked in human resources for more than two decades, and never has there been such an emphasis on mentoring as there is now. In my view, *mentor* is among the most overused buzzwords in the workplace today.

What is a mentor? Typically, a mentor is an older, more experienced person who helps guide your professional future. Mentor relationships can either be formal, organized through a mentoring program in your company, or informal, established through connections you make on your own. When you need feedback on your career trajectory or big decisions like changing jobs, a mentor can be a real catalyst for career growth. Unless you are part of a structured mentoring program, there are no hard-and-fast rules for how often you need to see or interact with your mentor. You might exchange e-mails every six months or sit down for lunch weekly. There is not even a limit on the number of mentors you can have; you may have one mentor or many.

Recently, the idea of mentorship has been radically

expanded from the description I've just given. In my line of work, I constantly field questions about mentors, and I read article after article discussing the importance of mentorship. Mentors have come to be seen as one-stop guidance shops, capable of omniscient, career-defining advice and advancement. If you do an Internet search of the word "mentor," prepare to be overwhelmed by the amount of advice meant to help you find, snare, talk to, properly utilize, keep, or break up with a mentor.

In today's work environment, it is a given that everyone—especially those underrepresented in their industries—needs a high-level mentor. I would even say that a lack of formal mentorship is perceived to be a serious, career-inhibiting problem. This means that a significant part of the existing literature is devoted to finding and building relationships with mentors (how do you get a high-level executive or master in your field to agree to mentor you in the first place?). If you read these articles without knowing anything about what mentors are, you get a strange impression of what mentoring means. Take a look at lists like "10 Killer Questions to Make the Most of Your Mentoring Meeting"<sup>1</sup> and "12 Questions You Should Ask Your Mentor ASAP."<sup>2</sup> Sample questions proposed in these pieces range from "Am I being crazy?" (please don't ask your mentor this—save it for your friends or your mom) to "Anything FORM—their family, occupation, recreation, and motivation" (again, exercise caution—there is a fine line between being interested and pandering). Neither of these questions, however, falls within the scope of traditional mentoring. Mentors are available as resources to give you perspective on how to build your career. Questions about negotiating salaries or navigating a job search are

perfect for mentors when you need an outside, experienced perspective.

The obsession with mentorship has gotten so out of hand that January has been declared “National Mentoring Month,”<sup>3</sup> and widespread institutional problems like a lack of diversity in the workplace are blamed on a lack of mentorship. While I agree that mentors can be important for women and minorities in industries where they are underrepresented, mentorship is not a silver bullet that will magically eradicate systemic inequities.

This overblown attitude toward mentoring is exasperating because, having coached tens of thousands of young professionals through their corporate journeys, never have I said, “The key to your fate is in someone else’s hands.” Don’t misunderstand me: mentors are important. Their counsel and war stories can be invaluable. You want people with the right perspective to give you advice and make introductions. Mentors are just one piece of a much larger puzzle, however. Your mentor is one person offering one perspective, and her advice may or may not be wise counsel.

From my two decades working in human resources, I have found that mentors are overutilized and undertrained, and they underdeliver. For example, people commonly make the mistake of taking a mentor’s advice as canon, but blindly following a mentor’s advice can have negative, even disastrous, results. A famous cautionary tale comes from Sheryl Sandberg: when she was considering taking her career-defining job at Google, a mentor of hers urged her not to do it—the opportunity was too risky and ill-suited for her, according to the mentor. Sandberg had the same experience when she was offered the position of COO at Facebook, arguably an even

more important career move.<sup>4</sup> Her mentor discouraged her from taking the job, advocating for a position with a more traditional company. Think of the loss both financially and professionally if she had followed her mentor's advice!

I experienced a similar situation in a formal mentoring program during my first high-level HR job. I was assigned a mentor who, at first, was quite useful. He helped me build perspective and hone my strategic operational skills. Over time, though, the relationship began to change. If I was reluctant to take his advice, I heard about it—and other people did, too. This was unhelpful and damaging to the reputation I had carefully crafted. Eventually, the relationship devolved.<sup>5</sup>

Unless your mentor undergoes formal training, there is no guarantee she knows anything about being helpful to you. Even if your mentor *has* attended a mentor training program, there is no guarantee that the training was adequate. Being a source of wisdom for a young person with a quickly evolving career is a tough task. Would you feel comfortable weighing in on another person's career-defining decision (for example, which job offer is best)? Remember, mentors are human, too. They can be biased, narrow-minded, jealous, and competitive. Any and all advice from external sources should be taken with a grain of salt. You have to consider your mentor's background, expertise, and motivations.

Additionally, many professionals enjoy mentoring but do not have the time to commit to a mentor-mentee relationship. An advisor who will look in on your career occasionally is different from a dedicated mentor who is consistently available as a sounding board. Many people do not take the time to establish their expectations as either a mentor or mentee, and thus end up disappointed. Another danger, especially if

you are working in an industry affected by ongoing technological change, is that you and your peers might have a better understanding of the implications of new technologies than your mentors. The advice you receive from mentors, while well intentioned, may be outdated.

Perhaps the biggest risk of mentorship is that it gives people the impression that the outcome of their career is dependent on the actions and input of others. **The truth is: you are in control of your success.** Of course there are going to be factors outside your control—the economic climate, for example—but you dictate your own reaction to changing circumstances. This idea can be disconcerting: taking on the burden of success is a big responsibility. But if you are as driven as I am, you probably like the idea of being captain of your own fate. The good news is that you don't need to reinvent the wheel: in *The Mentor Myth*, I share solid strategies that will help you take control of your career. Instead of continually looking outward for career guidance, look inward: your own strengths, capabilities, and vision of success are all you need to succeed.

The advice and tools in this book aren't academic theories or made-up anecdotes; they rest on my twenty years of experience as a human resources expert. Following a successful career in corporate HR, I founded my own firm, Inspired HR, which I continue to run today. We support the human resources needs of hundreds of thousands of employees—we oversee hiring, performance and career development, terminations of staff, and everything in between. Witnessing the journeys of tens of thousands of professionals as they navigate goals that include climbing the corporate ladder and founding their own businesses has given me unique insight

into the ingredients of professional success. While every person's journey is different, there are common themes that appear when you examine the journeys holistically. *The Mentor Myth* exposes those themes, offering my commentary on the career moves that lead to success and those that don't.

This is not the only book designed to help you think about your career. Plenty of guides give personal business advice, but they tend to divide into two categories: lifestyle balance (meditation, yoga, sleep) or high-level inspirational advice about "supercharging" your career. While these messages are empowering, readers often walk away with questions. On the surface, these two camps seem to promote conflicting demands on your time. Trying to do more yoga *and* be more committed to your career is admirable, but most people already feel like they are failing to optimize their busy schedules. Adding meditation *and* extra career counseling sessions pushes an already imbalanced schedule past the tipping point. Also, figuring out the mechanics of executing on more balance or more ambition is left up to the reader. Most people would probably agree that sleep is great, but they wonder *how* to fit more sleep into their frenetic lives. Similarly, many people would identify themselves as highly ambitious, and wonder what more "leaning in" translates to on an everyday basis. I have read all these books, but I rarely walk away with a clearer picture of *what* I need to be doing to advance my career. No one addresses the question of *how* to succeed.

This is what *The Mentor Myth* does—I will give you practical guidance for *how* to take ownership of your career. The purpose of the book is to provide you with the framework and strategies that will help you evaluate your goals, create a long-term plan to reach them, and be a top performer at work on

the day-to-day. These are tested techniques that have worked for highly successful people at all levels in many industries. What skills do you need to develop to be valuable? What is your long-term game? Given the highly dynamic nature of the modern workplace, a career coach, manager, or mentor cannot determine this for you as effectively as you can. This book will give you the framework to drive your own strategy and be your own talent agent. By the time you have finished reading this book, you will have clear ideas about how to be your own agent, coach, or HR manager.

Chapter 1 begins with my career exploration tool, which will help you define your career goals—you can't reach a goal unless you know what it is. The tool will guide you through an analysis of your professional ambitions from six different perspectives (passion, economics, lifestyle, values, skill, and demand). You will be asked questions like: What does success mean to you? What is your end goal, professionally? Do your lifestyle expectations match the earning potential of your chosen career? The advice that follows in the rest of the book will be framed by your goals and will help you figure out how to achieve your dreams now that you've established them.

In chapter 2, we'll address your starting point. You will see transition throughout your career, with different jobs, different companies, perhaps different industries, and possibly even vastly different regions of the globe. No matter where you are in your career, the advice in this book will be relevant for you. There are, however, some special times of transition that require a little extra thought if you're going to optimize them. These are: when you are beginning your college education, when you are looking for your first job, when you are

starting a company, and when you are looking to reenter the workforce after an extended absence. Chapter 2 discusses how to be strategic about planning your education and early career steps at these transition points.

Once you know what you want and where you are, we can get into the nuts and bolts of taking control of your career. Chapter 3 addresses how to manage your time effectively; none of the strategies in this book will help you unless you can make time to implement them. Then we'll move into establishing a personal brand (chapter 4), working on the "four Cs" (competence, confidence, communication, and commitment, in chapter 5), and establishing your network and sponsors (chapter 6). Chapter 6 is where you will find a more involved discussion of mentorship, but in the broader context of your network, sponsors, and peer groups. I will help you strategically incorporate external advice without being defined by it (remember, you are the one in control). Chapter 7 focuses on how to succeed at work by overpromising and overdelivering in everything you do. Chapter 8 discusses career transitions and taking risks to further your goals—no one has ever won by always playing it safe. Finally, we'll talk about the value of resilience—in other words, what to do when you fail (chapter 9).

After working through each chapter, you'll have a well-considered plan for taking control of your career. This is a comprehensive, easy-to-implement guide that requires only your brain, your time, and maybe a pen and paper (or your favorite form of digital note taking).

I have a habit of writing phrases that jump out at me on Post-It notes. My desks at work and at home are littered with neon squares scrawled with facts and phrases that grabbed

my attention (my kids have even gotten in on this, and occasionally I'll notice a sweet note from one of them hidden in the display). One of my favorite notes, which I go back to over and over again, reads as follows: "It's boring to be average."

Is the phrase a little sappy and trite? Sure, but I truly believe in the sentiment. Whether I was working full time during university (because I liked the job), taking out a loan and buying into a restaurant when I was twenty-four years old, or taking the plunge and starting my own firm—all as I was getting married and raising kids—my journey has been anything but "average." To me, my way of life is normal—the key to pulling off my work success while juggling a full personal life (which, as a woman, I am asked about again and again) has been my conviction in my own abilities and my skill in thoughtfully creating and adjusting strategies. I also have the ability to pick up the pieces when I fail. While I have had many fabulous mentors and advisors during my journey, and I will always be grateful to them, my success is my own. Many times I bucked conventional advice and took a strategic risk that ended up paying off. If I hadn't stepped outside the expectations of mentors and friends and formed my own strategies, I would not have achieved the success I have today.

Fortunately, I don't have a monopoly on conviction, strategy, or bravery. These are character traits that you can deploy on your own, using this book as a guide. As you read, create your own plan to take control of your career and your life, and rise above the average.



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# CHAPTER 1

## Taking Control of Your Career

**W**hat do you want to be when you grow up? Kids are fixated by this question, and, despite limited life experience, they usually have a clear answer. For example, my seven-year-old daughter wants to be a dolphin trainer by day and a doctor on the side. My son would like to be a sports announcer. That sounds more realistic than a dolphin trainer but I'm not counting on his career goal panning out, considering that he had a totally different answer last week—and a different one the week before that. We've run through everything from a cashier at A&W to president of the United States. But this constant evolution isn't a bad thing. In fact, adults could learn a thing or two from kids' focus on their future career—especially from the way their goals adapt based on their changing interests and on what they learn about the world.

Having a goal in mind becomes much more important as you begin to train and plan for your career. Most people

spend more time working than they do with their spouse, kids, and friends, so your career shouldn't be an afterthought. I believe you can't be successful without an idea of where you are going; very few people accidentally find themselves CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Can you think of one corporate leader who attributes his success to just having showed up? Even tech company founders, who seem more focused on building cool stuff than building companies, had an idea that their product could catch on and worked obsessively toward its success.

Being a Fortune 500 CEO might not be your vision of success, but if you are reading this book, you are professionally ambitious. Ambition needs direction. Getting what you want in life, professionally and personally, requires *knowing* what you want. The earlier you can define that vision, the better. Granted, this vision might change over time. It could even change radically as you realign priorities. But before you lean in, you have to have an idea of what you are leaning *into*.

The tricky part is, I find that people don't put much effort into career planning. In my experience, they tend to let their next steps be defined by managers, or they just put their heads down and work really hard, hoping someone will notice them. When it comes to promotion, most of us are presented with a plan and then follow it. Ironically, research suggests this might have something to do with behavior learned in school—we are rewarded for following directions with good grades and positive attention.<sup>1</sup> We get points for getting everything right, not for taking risks or making mistakes. Very little about this operative strategy translates into getting ahead in your career.

To further complicate matters, millennials (the generation

born after 1982)<sup>2</sup> are expected to stay in jobs less than three years—meaning they will hold fifteen to twenty jobs during the course of their careers.<sup>3</sup> Even if you have a well-thought-out plan in place, how do you anticipate every one of those transitions? And if you don't do *any* planning, what happens to you? The chances of ending up in a profession you don't want to be in seem infinitely higher. Navigating a modern career seems to require the skill of a chess master, looking many moves ahead at any given time.

The conclusion here is that a successful career requires both planning and flexibility, two elements that at first glance seem diametrically opposed. But a closer look reveals that, in real life, the two are complements. You can't be expected to plot your exact career trajectory and later be totally comfortable when your dreams get blown up by a recession or the arrival of a child. What I am advocating is that you have an idea of where you are going and be willing to accept that your vision might change as life changes around you.

The good news is that better career planning is not dependent on input from other people, so you can set the mentor myth aside: you have control over whether you are thoughtful about your next career steps. You decide if you are going to have a long-term, strategic professional plan in place.

My intent is to help you think about the kind of life you want and how you will make that happen. Keep in mind that none of this advice is about finding that next rung on the corporate ladder. This chapter is meant to help you navigate the road map of your career with easy, practical steps; you need to define what success looks like and then align that vision of success with the career and lifestyle you would like to have.

## The Career Exploration Tool

I wish I were able to go back and give my twenty-year-old self some practical career advice. While I ended up on a career trajectory I am proud of, I could have gotten there much earlier if I'd paid more attention to where I was going. After two decades in human resources, I have a much more nuanced perspective of what it takes to make a well-considered career plan.

When coaching people on their careers, I focus on six elements: passion, lifestyle, values, economics, skill, and demand. Thinking strategically about each of these elements lets you create a framework for a solid career map. And no matter where you are in your career (university, new grad, or seasoned veteran of the workforce), this tool is relevant. We can all make adjustments to either refine our vision, if we like where we are going, or radically change our plan, if we are unhappy. This tool helps you consider your professional journey from every angle, and it is worth revisiting often as you navigate your way to your professional goals.

### Passion

In my HR consulting practice, I find that the average person spends 50 percent of her waking hours working, commuting, thinking about work, or returning texts, e-mails, and phone calls related to work. If you are a career-oriented person or a business owner, this percentage is probably even higher (and let's face it, some of us probably *never* entirely stop thinking about work). Chapter 3 will focus explicitly on time