

Business/News & Views®

Learn How to Fish

By: [David W. Weatherholt, MBA](#)

We have all been influenced by different people during our lives: parents, teachers, coaches, heroes or even friends. These special people give advice, information, encouragement and even correction, which are all meant to give us the wisdom of their experiences. The old Chinese Proverb "*Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime,*" is the product of a mentoring relationship. If you have been fortunate enough to be in this kind of relationship, you learned how to fish.

Mentoring is that caring, sharing and helping relationship, where one person invests time, experience and energy to improve another person's growth, knowledge and skill. Responding to the crucial needs of another person, preparing them for increased performance, productivity and achievement is the role of a mentor.

Major corporations assign experienced senior executives to less experienced junior leaders to provide direction, encouragement, guidance and training. In this way, they develop experienced leaders to ensure the future viability and growth of the organization. Understanding the success and mistakes of others is very powerful. Gaining knowledge from people who have been there already is the best way to learn.

In a small business you need to play multiple roles, being on the front line each day with your customers, employees, contractors and vendors and also be the creative thinker and decision maker, so you can lead your employees and business down a successful and fulfilling path. Who mentors you? Most small businesses don't have the advantage of a board of directors whose purpose is to ensure the business remains viable, providing a sounding board for the company's senior management.

A successful business doesn't just happen; it is the result of good ideas, hard work, investment, organization, planning, promotion and taking advantage of lucky breaks. A good mentoring relationship allows you to move your business not only to the "next level" but move it to the "correct level." An ongoing series of mentoring meetings, fashioned after a board meeting, provides an opportunity for you, the owner, to focus on the big picture, stepping back and taking a fresh look at your business, to see it as others do.

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A successful business executive once shared one of his secrets to business success. He had a small business, a sole proprietorship, where he was the "man." He had no one to answer to and was free to choose his own direction. What he discovered was that he didn't have all of the answers and needed the advice of those with experience. He developed his own board of directors and sought out individuals with the skills needed to match his areas of weakness. He even paid these board members a small fee to provide guidance and, most importantly, he agreed to be bound by the decisions of his board of directors. His business became very successful.

Recognizing that you don't have all the answers is good, but the void must be filled to achieve success. As you quickly find out, your business actually owns you. You get stuck in the day-to-day activities, and at the end of the day all your energy is spent. Your feelings of emptiness are laced with pangs of guilt. You wonder...but secretly, you know that you have neglected the leadership part of your business; the short-term consumes the long-term. As my friend found out and what other successful business owners have learned is that you can get the help needed to make business success a natural process. Looking for input from others in a mentoring relationship is healthy for you and your business.



Let me know if you have any comments, questions, or suggestions.

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