



“Finding a fitness architect is as crucial as finding a successful building architect. The power of mentoring, while often unexplored, yields a wealth of firsthand knowledge and experience.”

working with a

A Primer in Three Easy Steps

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Mentor

We teach what we need to learn and, in so doing, we learn most what we need to teach.

These wise words reflect the thought that teaching is eternal. Part of eternal teaching involves mentoring, a mutually enriching process in which mentors share fitness wisdom and “mentorees” receive a fast-track toward success. Fitness mentoring has a dual purpose. First, it allows those with thriving fitness models to share that expertise with others. Second, mentoring brings a realistic career path to fitness professionals with ambition by pairing them up with successful business plans in the industry.

Types of Mentors

The first type is an **onsite** mentor. This one lives close to the mentoree and can conduct in-person mentoring sessions at regular intervals. The benefits include face time, individual coaching and live interaction, which are important when physical movement is part of the sessions so mentors can see uninterrupted movements.

The second type of mentor is a **distance** mentor, whose teaching involves electronic communication and social media bridging the geographic distance between the two parties. Outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, Skype™ and email allow both sides visual and verbal access, making sessions possible across miles of separation. Both parties see, hear and interact with each other in real time.

Step 1: Finding a Mentor

In order to find the most successful mentors in a specific discipline, fitness professionals should make inquiries of Group Fitness Managers (for group fitness

mentors), Personal Training Managers (for personal training mentors), and of fitness chains themselves (for names of their most popular instructors and programs). Candidly expose plans to find a mentor, and ask for someone they would recommend as the most popular and professional in any specific area of expertise. The Internet, Facebook and Twitter also buzz with the energy, success and testimonials of the fitness professionals with the loudest number of followers.

There are two methods of finding a mentor, involving either the **message** or the **messenger**. The first method entails finding someone who embraces the **message** to which the mentoree relates. For example, Don Bahneman, a successful personal trainer, program director and entrepreneur, began mentoring with fitness icon Shannon Fable about nine years ago because he believed that Fable personified the types of programs he wanted to be able to deliver. Through mentoring with SFResources.com, he subsequently went on to present for IDEA and other organizations, film DVDs through Healthy Learning, and lecture to fitness professionals.

The second method of finding a mentor uses the personality of the **messenger** instead of the discipline. Lyndsay Murray-Kashoid, Exhale-trained mind-body instructor based in Dallas, Texas, approached this author with the following question: “Lawrence, while I’m most probably not interested in teaching step, cardio or aqua like you do, I feel connected to your fitness personality and wonder if you could mentor me so I can shadow you and become a presenter at conventions?” In this case, the mentoree approached the mentor

because of what the mentor represented in terms of career success, not because of a discipline-specific inquiry. “Lawrence had been winning fitness awards and appearing at fitness conventions which was exactly what I wanted to do, and mentoring with him led to presenting internationally, authoring and more jobs overall,” says Murray-Kashoid.

To find a mentor, consider approaching some of the fitness personalities who appear at conventions to inquire if they mentor. Alternatively, use the Internet to access the convention schedules of professional fitness training conferences around the world, and read the biographies of the selected presenters and speakers. Then, contact them using the Internet to inquire about mentoring possibilities.

Step 2: Negotiating Suggestions

When approaching a possible mentor, Jay Blahnik, fitness legend and mentor based in Laguna Beach, Calif., suggests a simple, three-part rule. “Be brief, be brilliant, be gone. In the initial inquiry, briefly state your professional goals, including why you are choosing any particular possible mentor, so the person knows you have done your homework and know something about his or her work. Inquire about fees and *types* of mentoring arrangements. Wait for the prospective mentor to contact you.” If approaching a prospective mentor via email, include a fitness résumé and a snapshot to make the inquiry more personal, and follow up the email with a Facebook friend request. If inquiring in person at a convention, always approach a possible mentor *after* a day of sessions instead of *before* sessions because everyone is busy beforehand.

The following checklist outlines communication steps:

1. Ask: “Do you have established fees? If so, what are they? If not, can we set up an initial consult so I can explain to you what I think you could do for me, and then you tell me if you could assist me in achieving those goals?” (It is important to explain any budgetary constraints from the start.)
2. Avoid the term “brain-picking.” Asking a successful fitness personality if you can “brain pick” is both as insulting and impossible as asking for a few decades of wisdom summarized into a few sentences, for free. A client shopping for a health-care practitioner cannot go to a doctor’s office and interview prospective candidates by just asking to “pick a brain” for a few minutes. Inquire instead about mentoring services.
3. Offer something from the start. At some fitness conferences, many attendees seeking mentors approach this author stating: “Lawrence, here’s my card. During the course of this convention, if you have any time for me to buy you something from Starbucks™, just call or text and I’ll meet you there to inquire about mentoring questions.” This demonstrates an appreciation of the presenter’s time.
4. Be public about the relationship! Ask the mentor for permission to post on social media all of your mentoring opportunities featuring photographs of the two of you together. Also, ask the mentor for a one-minute testimonial about your work and personality that you can use on your Facebook Timeline, YouTube channel and website.

Step 3: Outlining the Work

When working with a mentor, be sure to be honest about making realistic goals and action plans. If a mentor suggests something that seems unreasonable from the start, reveal that immediately. Head nodding in gentle acquiescence, only to ignore tasks thereafter, yields disappointment on both ends and prevents a buildup of trust and nurturing. Make a timeline. Be sure to have a clear understanding at the end of every meeting or telephone session which particular action items must be carried out by specific dates.

Having a mentor carries mutual responsibilities. Julz Arney, creative director of Team Arney, Inc., based in Orange County, Calif., has been mentoring successful fitness professionals on a global scale for years. “A diligent mentoree is a contributor to the relationship,” she states. “He or she should have something to offer the mentor that is of value in exchange, whether that is administrative help, class assistance or good old-fashioned inspiration! Furthermore, since the mentoree is a direct reflection of the mentor, when the mentoree is given an opportunity, he or she should be highly prepared and ready to shine. It is a responsibility to step up.”

Be proactive about opportunities for work, even without compensation, in exchange for valuable, firsthand experience. If mentoring with a nearby, popular instructor, suggest going to class and helping with equipment setup. If appropriate, be available to walk around and offer corrections in the class, giving additional value to the members who take class that day. The mentor not only will bring attention to the mentoree, but also will help the mentoree gain recognition through mere association. Personal trainers seeking mentors should try to “shadow” the mentor trainer for a half or full day in order to observe the trainer in action and learn from all of the live interactions that occur. Fitness managers searching for mentors should try to walk a mile in that manager’s shoes for a day. If a mentor will be appearing at a fitness conference, offer to attend the conference as an official assistant. In some cases, mentorees can receive at least those sessions for free in exchange for helping to set up rooms, walking around to assist convention delegates, and handing out business cards at the end of the session.

In Conclusion

Using a mentor saves time, helps to avoid making mistakes, and opens career portals in a fast-track way. Imagine the daunting task of trying to build a dream home without the proven blueprints of architects who have already built similar dream homes. Finding a fitness architect is as crucial as finding a successful building architect. The power of mentoring, while often unexplored, yields a wealth of firsthand knowledge and experience. AF

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