

Leadership & Managing People

What Efficient Mentorship Looks Like

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Summary. When we're feeling drained, mentoring is one of the tasks that tends to fall by the wayside. But mentors don't have to burn themselves out to be helpful and effective. This approach, called "fuel-efficient mentoring" by the authors, suggests how to be a mentor in an efficient manner that benefits mentees, growing their confidence and their network, but also conserves your energy. First, define boundaries and expectations, recognizing your own preferences; second, set a time budget that mentees can draw on; third, reconsider how you structure meetings

with mentees and try group conversations; fourth, try virtual meetings; and finally, look for ways to turn other commitments, such as professional events, into mentoring opportunities. [close](#)

The endless string of demanding tasks at work can leave us running on empty — deadlines, meetings, projects, and ongoing training modules all demanding our effort and limiting our time to refuel. As an energy-saving measure, we may cut corners.

One task that commonly falls down on the priority list is mentoring. While mentoring brings purpose and satisfaction, it can be draining. But while plenty of literature focuses on general mentorship strategies — the why, what, who, where, and when — strategies to save time and energy are often overlooked.

In the face of a pandemic with no end in sight, we must preserve our fuel supplies while we mentor others. It is possible to be a mentor in an efficient manner that benefits mentees, growing their confidence and their network, but also conserves your energy. We call this an approach we call fuel-efficient mentoring.

The goal of fuel-efficient mentoring is straightforward: to become a more adept mentor with an even larger group of mentees while expending less energy and less time. This is not just about finding ways to get more from your efforts. By setting clear boundaries and expectations, it's possible to foster important skills and offer stronger networks that may prove more useful for mentees in the long run.

A good place to start is clarifying the baseline expectations. To start, mentors must realize their own preferences. Consider your expectation of mentees' responsibilities, then draft a document of standards and save it for future use. For example: Mentees should be prompt, create the agenda, organize calendar invitations (including a web-based conference link for virtual meetings), and complete action items. A templated list at the start of a relationship can offer friendly but direct guidelines to each mentee. During your relationship, you can revisit the document together and optimize further. Provide

context, informing the mentee that these standards will provide organization and leadership skills, and keep you, the mentor, focused on their larger needs.

An important piece of setting expectations as a mentor is establishing a budget of how much time you expect to spend annually — for one mentee, you might dedicate two to six hours per year, depending on the mentee's needs. Share your time budget with the mentee. This allows mentees to see the mentor's time as a currency and develop thoughts and questions prior to reaching out. It creates independence and confidence for mentees and pushes them to problem solve on their own prior to scheduling a meeting. It isn't that mentors shouldn't welcome questions, but mentors are best positioned to guide mentees after they've considered their options in advance. To increase fuel efficiency, consider whether or not the problem can be resolved efficiently over email and consider shortening meetings with mentees from 60 minutes to 40 minutes. Move 30-minute meetings to 20- or 10-minute intervals.

Next, reconsider how you structure meetings with mentees. Traditionally, the mentor-mentee relationship is a dyad: Two people meet and discuss topics often framed under themes of professional growth, interpersonal conflict, or work-life balance, for instance. Often, mentors have similar conversations separately with a few mentees, and the answers they give to one would be relevant to the others, too. With that in mind, instead of spending five hours meeting separately with five mentees, consider combining the five separate mentee meetings into a single hour. (It is reasonable to deduct that one hour from each mentee's time budget.) This approach can save time, sure, but there are other advantages, too: In the group setting, mentees can share perspective with each other and offer peer-to-peer mentorship. This establishes support and validation when mentees hear similar struggles and unmet aspirations. It also allows the mentees to build their trusted spaces and personal networks as a group by discussing what would otherwise be private matters in a 1:1 meeting. By grouping mentees, you impact more mentees and overwhelm your calendar less.

Group mentoring sessions do not have to be in-person — as we've learned in the Covid-19 era, they work well virtually, with cameras on and audio unmuted. Mentees from different institutions and different geographic locations can conveniently collaborate under the mentor's guidance. Another avenue for combining mentees is through listservs. Merge like-minded mentees from a few groups into one email group, or one listserv, and direct high-yield and relevant emails to the larger collated group with ease. Additionally, consider using group messaging apps, which allow for ongoing conversations between mentees with distanced and energy saving oversight from the mentor. This keeps the mentor present and engaged while allowing flexibility to disconnect and hold notifications.

Finally, now that you've realized and set expectations as well as changed the foundation of your meetings, look at how other obligations can double as mentoring opportunities. Consider a work-related or professional development event, such as a virtual webinar or mixer or even a board meeting a chance to invite your mentee. During a pandemic, virtual opportunities are effective and abundant. Consolidating meetings is a winning approach for a few reasons. This strategy combines the time we, the mentors, had planned to spend independently with time alongside a mentee. It also allows the mentee to see our interests, networking skills, and influence. Lastly, it provides the opportunity to introduce the mentee to other potential mentors. Constructing a curated team of mentors for a mentee is a gift and fuel-efficient approach to offer more support to a mentee.

Mentoring should not burn and drain energy. It can be fuel-efficient and effortless. Look for ways to communicate expectations, schedule effectively, and consolidate mentees. These strategies provide room to go farther on the journey as a mentor.

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