

## The Many Faces of Mentoring: Mentoring Has Gone Virtual

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### Introduction

Mentoring takes many forms. Traditionally, we think of mentoring as a personal face-to-face relationship, such as when the world's greatest symphony orchestra conductor, Serge Koussevitzky took Leonard Bernstein under his wing or when Columbia University Professor Ben Graham became Warren Buffet's mentor in business school. Michael Jordan had his coach, Phil Jackson; Mother Teresa her teacher, Father Michael van der Peet, and so the list goes on.

At the beginning of my career as a teacher and an educator, I was fortunate to have personal mentors find and coach me on leadership skills, education and critical thinking and writing. When faced with new challenges, someone seemed to miraculously appear as my mentor. Mentors found me and we built strong learning relationships together.

After receiving my doctoral degree in organizational behavior and starting my own consulting business more than thirty-five years ago, the dynamics began to change. Mentors no longer just magically showed up at my door ready to coach me. I had to find and build my own mentoring relationships.

Thirty years ago, I started to experiment with "virtual mentoring" strategies. They began with guidance from leaders in my field. I learned to follow their thinking through books, professional journals, conferences, and eventually in the form of videos and DVDs. I was mentored by Gary Hamel, Fernando Flores, Umberto Maturano, C.K. Prahalad, Gary Hamel, Warren Bennis, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Noel Tichy, Charlie Seashore, Meg Wheatley, Harry Mintzberg and many others in areas of my life and business interests. I knew them well without ever having spoken a word to them. I absorbed their written words and ideas as I followed them avidly. Their thoughts and ideas heavily influenced my thinking, opened my eyes to new horizons and immeasurably helped me to deal with complex issues in my business and consulting practices. Eventually, I met some of my "virtual mentors" in face-to-face meetings, conferences and workshops, all of which reinforced my virtual mentoring experience.

Today there are even more virtual resources for mentoring. Your mentors can and do show up through internet search engines, blogs, books, periodicals, tapes, video clips, TV shows, documentary films, CD's and DVD's. Thanks to our telecommunication links, we can reach out to anyone in the world quickly and inexpensively. We are no longer confined to family and friends, organization and industry, city or country. We can establish mentoring relationships on the web – asking web partners to be our just-in-time mentors. Business and social networks are a great way to establish mentoring relationships through sharing interests and goals, like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or metatag search engines to catch key words and phrases, such as, [Alohah!](#), [Beaucoup!](#), [Clusty](#), [Ixquick](#), [Metacrawler](#), and [Search.com](#).

Mentoring has no geographic, economic or political boundaries. Its effects are global and lasting. In India, Dadabhai Naorohi mentored Ghandi in the philosophy of passive resistance. Years later, Gandhi's struggle for political and human rights through non-violence influenced Dr. Martin Luther King to change the face of America. Today, almost every person of significance is available to us. We need to search, find, study and sometimes make contact with them. Never before in history have we had so many potential mentors at our fingertips.

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## Different Kinds of Mentors

Mentoring needs to be evaluated frequently to see if current mentoring relationships are worthwhile or have become stale. To get your career back on track, MasteryWorks, Inc. offers an online tool, the [MENTORSMART™ Assessment](#), to help you identify and evaluate the kinds of mentors you need at any time. The more specific you are about what you need, the easier it is to find a mentor – virtual or face-to-face. We include eight different types of mentoring: career development, work/life integration, industry knowledge, professional/trade knowledge, technology, organization knowledge, customer knowledge and work/process knowledge. It's rare that one person can mentor you in all of these domains. So, determine what you need and then begin your search.

See: [http://www.masteryworks.com/newsite/assessments/assess\\_mentor.htm](http://www.masteryworks.com/newsite/assessments/assess_mentor.htm)

Books and videos are certainly educational. But if you want to get closer to mentoring relationships with great minds of this generation, you need more. How can you establish a mentoring relationship with a Gary Hamel? How can you get to see the contribution of recently deceased CK Prahalad's thinking? One way is to go onto to Delicious.com. It has nearly 500 blogs and articles from, to and about Gary Hamel and hundreds on, from and about CK Prahalad. Find a subject you want to blog and get into Gary Hamel's head. Your bookmark will be a magnet for information and learning. You may never meet some of your most valuable "virtual mentors," but their thinking and advice can hone your skills or change your approaches. Both Hamel and Prahalad have done that for me, but I never met either one face-to-face.

## Two Sources of Virtual Mentoring

Leave your world behind for a moment. Go outside of your department, organization and industry. Get connected to the people who are on the leading edge, experts who will inspire you and take you to new places and ideas. The best mentors in the world today are also going virtual. They are just a computer stroke away on the internet. TED.com and Delicious.com rank high among my personal favorites.

Billy Farren, an educational technology expert from Trumbull Connecticut, (and my nephew), believes that the quality of many blogs and Internet sites can exceed a one-on-one traditional mentoring experience. "For me," he says, "the quality and quantity of on-line sites and blogs continue to improve. They provide an interaction with many people making it a richer educational experience than dealing with one person, whether it's face-to-face or through a book, clip or tape." He points out that "in my field of education technology, there are many virtual interactive mentoring tools, such as blogs, comments, and sites. Delicious.com is one example of a worthwhile on-line mentoring tool."

### Delicious.com

[Delicious.com](http://Delicious.com) is a Social Bookmarking Network, where you can find and share a wide variety of subjects on bookmarks, and instantly follow, read and listen to experts in the areas you have bookmarked. Delicious.com gets you into the heads of the "best of the best" to see what they're thinking from moment to moment. With the largest collection of bookmarks currently on the web, Delicious.com will find, track and keep the topics you choose. Delicious is also a Social Bookmarking service, which means you can save all your bookmarks online, share them with other people, and see what other people are bookmarking. You can find the most relevant bookmarks being saved right now across many areas of interest. It works by letting you tag words to describe a bookmark. When you or others bookmark, your tag automatically comes up in the collection so you can check out other people's bookmarks and others can view your bookmarks. It's a great way to share your knowledge, as every tag page has an easy to remember URL that you can send on to interested parties. Build your network and find your mentors at the same time.

### **Ted.com**

[TED.com](http://TED.com) (Technology Entertainment and Design) is perfect for people on the run. TED consists of video clips of conferences from all over the world, where speakers break new ground and bring new ideas to a world audience. Ted.com offers a wide range of videos containing important "ideas worth spreading." Since 2007, TED has offered thousands of videos for free online viewing and there are more than 700 currently available. More than 25 million viewers have watched the site over 250 million times. It's an important resource for anyone involved in management or leadership roles and an indispensable tool for Human Resources.

### **What to Look for in Mentors**

As you well know, going it alone can be a long, tough journey. Today, having multiple mentors is a necessity because so much is changing around us. No one person can coach us in all the important disciplines of a complex workplace. Finding the right mentors can never be overstated. George Leonard, a leading authority on Mastery, placed instruction as the first key to mastery. "Find the right guide to take you on your journey, if you want to reach your goal." The concept is not new. Three hundred years ago, Isaac Newton said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." In a published collection of interviews more than 13 years ago, Joan Ames gave us an anecdotal glimpse into the lives of a handful of people who had attained mastery in their respective fields. A common theme in each case was that their journey started and continued with appropriate teachers or mentors.

Whether on-line or face-to-face, your mentor should be someone you respect and admire, a positive person of good character, someone who inspires you to your highest potential, a person who cares about success as much as you, and a person who has expertise in the area of your learning. Age means little. Someone younger may be a whiz on computers while someone older may have more hands on experience in your field; your mentor's age should only be defined by expertise. Your mentor should be available for interaction either face-to-face or virtually. No matter how successful the mentors are whom you've chosen, they need to be available to pick you up when you fall down and help you through hard times. You need a mentor that is open-minded. This will allow you to progress in a way you want, not necessarily in the way the mentor would prefer that you progress. You need to choose a mentor who can sharpen the focus on what you would like to achieve. The best mentoring relationships are open and honest. They build trust and develop into sharing experiences where information goes well beyond the normal exchange of knowledge, but becomes something special being passed between mentors and protégés. Many of us have changed a virtual mentor into a personal mentoring relationship. Remember, your mentors are learning too and looking for inspiration and new ideas themselves.

### **The Pros and Cons of Virtual Mentoring**

Admittedly, many people prefer face-to-face conversations rather than going online to articulate career goals and share their passions. But Skype and other online visual conferencing tools help provide the same touching, feeling and seeing experience. On the other hand, most people in this fast moving age need a number of mentors. It's easier to coordinate, track and replay mentoring sessions online when a multiplicity of mentors are at your fingertips. Online discussions of the framework, goals and expectations in a written document sometimes can be more helpful than direct conversations.

Questions often lead to more questions requiring face-to-face mentors. If you feel more comfortable with instantaneous responses and the give and take of face-to-face discussions, then virtual mentoring is probably not for you. However, if your best mentors are some distance from you, unavailable when you are ready to ask questions, you should consider augmenting your face-to-face mentors with online strategies.

## Summary

Mentoring takes many forms. It can be a traditional, personal face-to-face relationship or it can be resource based on internet search engines, blogs, books, periodicals, tapes, video clips, CD's and DVD's. Many people prefer face-to-face conversations rather than going online to articulate career goals and share their passions. But Skype and other online visual conferencing tools help provide the same touching, feeling and seeing experience. Go outside of your department, organization and industry. Get connected to the people who are on the leading edge, experts who will inspire you and take you to new places and ideas. The best mentors in the world are going virtual; they are just a computer stroke away on the internet. If you want to get closer to a mentoring relationship with great minds of this generation, consider the value of virtual mentoring. And, become a virtual mentor yourself!

## References

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## About the Author:

**Caela Farren, Ph. D.**, President of MasteryWorks, is a leading career development authority providing solutions to large and mid-size companies, including Sprint, Lockheed-Martin, and Capitol One. MasteryWorks provides enterprise web portals, training, consulting, and an assessment framework for employees and managers. For more than 30 years, Dr. Farren has been a tireless advocate around complex issues redefining the workplace. She envisioned the current workplace climate by more than a decade, when she published the book, "Who is Running Your Career: Creating Stable Work in Unstable Times" (Bard Press, 1997). Through MasteryWorks, she oversees solutions that create the foundation for impact-filled "career conversations" - centered on increased contribution, performance, and fit. Her strategic approach consistently delivers on employee engagement and retention goals for her clients.

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