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## BECOMING A MENTOR TO YOURSELF

### IN THIS CHAPTER

- How learning to mentor herself helped Julie Hauser find a job and a career she really loves.
- Identifying the skills of your perfect mentor and applying those skills to yourself.
- Shifting your attitude from working *for* a company to working *with* one.
- The importance of drafting your own mission statement and goals and letting them guide you as you begin your self-mentoring journey.
- Overcoming common obstacles on your self-mentoring journey.
- Giving yourself permission to unearth your own greatness.

I first met Julie Hauser in 1996. She'd recently earned a degree in speech communications and was working as a marketer for a nonprofit organization. Always smart about following her interests, Julie accepted a professional position that she would not only be good at but also enjoy. Yet Julie still experienced, as she put it, the shock of being “low man on the totem pole.”

“When you're in school, you're idealistic about what you think you can accomplish or contribute [on the job],” she said. She'd expected to make contributions early, but learned that her ideas were more likely to be heard “down the road.” The staff at Julie's organization was small; there were no mentors who could help her advance.

“I had the sense that some people wanted to keep new hires in their place, but I also felt I'd

have to pay my dues,” Julie explained. “They weren’t going to let [recent] college grads handle the big stuff right away.”

Maybe you’re familiar with or even a little scared about experiencing a situation similar to what Julie faced. One that would be not only disillusioning, but disheartening. One that would leave you no other choice but to wait patiently until your work began to “speak for itself.”

Julie wasn’t willing to wait that long or risk developing a negative attitude that would, in the end, leave her miserable as well as unproductive. So she decided to take action. She enrolled in a course I was teaching at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, a course that would teach her how to be her own best advocate in the workplace. The topic? *Be Your Own Mentor*.

Within one year of taking the course, Julie sought and accepted a job that was more in line with her writing interests (working for a small publisher of human resource materials) and soon moved to a better position with KPMG Consulting (now BearingPoint), where she stayed three-and-a-half years. During that time she ultimately decided to change her focus from written communications to something that would help individuals more directly. In keeping with her interest in human resources, she pursued a master’s degree in career counseling.

And today, Julie has a job she loves: she is a certified career counselor who works for Georgetown University, the place she started her self-mentoring journey.

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## RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

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Like Julie, you are capable of giving yourself permission to do what is necessary and ethical to be your own best advocate in the workplace. Indeed, only you can do this—no one else will do it for you. The best place to start is right here, right now, by committing to becoming your own mentor.

Note the deliberate use of the word “becoming” rather than “being.” You will grow into this role. You don’t have to have all the answers immediately—just a desire to honor and explore the questions and choices that arise.

One of these choices will be the attitude you adopt toward yourself and your work. Becoming your own mentor means considering your career your business and yourself self-employed. We are *all* self-employed, says business consultant and author Cliff Hakim, whether or not we are employed by a company. Therefore, he says, we must develop a self-employed attitude. This attitude is independent—we rely on our own initiative—and interdependent—we collaborate with our employers and coworkers to achieve success.

## WHAT’S A MENTOR?

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You may have heard the word “mentor” used to describe someone, usually an older, more experienced person, who serves as a trusted teacher and counselor, especially in a business setting. Books and articles on mentoring frequently point out that the word “mentor” comes from Greek mythology. As you may remember from studying *The Odyssey* in high school, *Mentor* was the name of the trusted wise man who protected and educated Odysseus’ son Telemachus when Odysseus left to fight the Trojan Wars. Mentor, though, was actually the goddess of wisdom—Athena—in disguise.

Odysseus had asked Athena to guide and protect his son while he was away. Athena, disguised as Mentor, became Telemachus’ teacher, counselor, and even networker as she guided him in his adult quest to find the father who’d been missing for ten years.

Personally, I find it interesting and illuminating that Mentor was both male and female. Mentor personified the innate “wisdom energy” of both genders: the feminine energy of intuition combined with the masculine energy of acting on that

inner knowing. Think about that—using Mentor as a model, we, too, can call on our own individual mix of male and female energies to be the mentor we always wanted.

## YOUR PERFECT MENTOR

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Consider the role of a business mentor. What does a mentor do? What personal qualities should a mentor have?

When asked to do this as an exercise, Julie and the other students in the class found it relatively easy to complete. They suggested qualities such as compassion, being “in the loop,” understanding, helping you run the political “gauntlet,” being able to listen without judging, encouraging you, broadcasting your successes, and challenging you—sometimes through honest and gentle criticism—to do your best work.

In other words, a mentor is a balloon that helps you rise above yourself and a parachute that cushions your falls.

Then I asked, “Can you imagine practicing these behaviors on yourself?” A stunned silence filled the room, and everyone grinned. They supposed they could practice these behaviors, they said, but how odd to think of being kind, compassionate, and gentle to themselves!

Yet this is what self-mentoring means: treating yourself gently, as would a savvy and skillful, wise and compassionate mentor. When you act as your own mentor, you see challenges as opportunities to try out new skills and enjoy new successes. If one of your efforts fails, you learn what worked and what didn’t, and then try again, rather than blame yourself unmercifully for failing or your employer for being unreasonable. Instead of depending on your employer to manage your career, you become aware that you yourself can have the most significant influence on your success. Yet at the same time, you understand that success is based on collaboration with others—and so you come to understand what Cliff Hakim calls working “with”

rather than “for” an employer. You decide to become curious and open to new challenges. You welcome change rather than feel threatened by it.

When change is as common as it is in today’s business world, it’s helpful to continuously reconnect with your inner mentor. Compare your ideas of what you thought you knew against what is really happening. Your idea of yourself, of what you like, and of what you think is best for you may change over time. Use your inner mentor’s wisdom to navigate your unique career path. Then you will be prepared to accept and succeed at new opportunities that come your way.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF DRAFTING A DREAM**

You can tap into the mentor you have inside yourself, the trusted guide who has the qualities of compassion, understanding, challenge, encouragement, and celebration. Tapping the mentor within begins when you consider your work in the context of your career/life dream. What is the touchstone of your career/life dream—the thing that makes you happy and the thing you must do to feel fulfilled?

For Julie, the touchstone at her first job involved creating written products that had meaning or were useful to others in some way. Then, when she began working at KPMG Consulting, she realized she wanted to help colleagues strategize about the best way to meet their marketing and communication goals. Her opinions were important, not just her end products. During the three-and-a-half years she worked at the consulting firm, she realized that she didn’t just want to help people strategize about marketing (and ultimately make more money for the company) but wanted to help people strategize about more profound goals in their personal and professional lives. So she returned to school to be certified as a career counselor, to help people more directly and to support her own interest in the human resources field.

Discovering your own touchstone will help you think of your career in terms of the legacy you want people to remember you by. Sometimes doing this is difficult, especially if you're not one of those people who seemed to have been born knowing what they wanted to do with their lives. It helps to remember that your touchstone often evolves, as Julie's did. Listen to your inner guide, and your legacy will make itself known in time.

One way to get started on this discovery is to experiment with the following activity:

Imagine you are at the top of your career, and that you are being honored with an award for your accomplishments. How will you be introduced? What tributes will you receive? Quickly jot down five to ten achievements for which you'd like to be recognized. What do each of these have in common? What does this commonality tell you about the legacy you want to leave, and the quality your work life must have in order for you to be fulfilled?

If you prefer to draw rather than to write, draw a coat of arms with illustrations that represent some of your hoped-for accomplishments. Add a written epigraph (a motto or quotation that states a theme) that summarizes your mark on the world.

Appendix 1A (Draft a Dream) is designed to help you use the results of this activity to craft your work/life mission. Appendices 1B (Realize Your Dream by Creating Powerful Goals) and 1C (Align Your Goals and Activities to Minimize Effort, Maximize Results) take you further into making that mission real and doable. Use these appendices as worksheets for creating your mission and goals.

Drafting a dream and creating the goals and steps that will help you realize that dream can clarify the process of making life- and career-related decisions. When faced with a choice of activities, ask yourself whether the activity supports your mission and goals. If it doesn't, then choose a new activity.

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## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

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Saying yes to your dreams can be scary. For example, committing to acting as your own mentor may leave you thinking, *yeah, right, like I know so much*. Or envious of those who seem to have it more together than you.

And so we encounter obstacles to progress. Some of these we create ourselves: too many appointments to keep, not enough “saying no” to inconsequential things; letting a parking ticket lapse beyond the point of appeal, and then having to argue to get the late fee dropped. Other obstacles come into our lives uninvited and unexpected: the cats get sick, a relative decides to visit you for a week, your best friend picks a fight. All of these take time to resolve and time away from working on our goals.

Guess what? These obstacles happen to all of us. Recognize them for what they are. Ordinary life events? Fear of failure? Resistance to change? Something else? Whatever they may be, make friends with them, and with yourself, as the person who is capable of surmounting these obstacles. Most important, treat yourself as your ideal mentor would: with compassionate listening, gentle encouragement, and celebration of the unique gifts and strengths you bring to the world.

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## WHEN RESISTANCE RISES

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Everyone encounters inner resistance from time to time. Some of us talk about it or think about it more, or more deeply, than others.

If you have trouble committing to being your own mentor, think about what’s underneath your resistance. What are you afraid might happen? For each fear is there a tradeoff? A reward to make it worth transcending the fear?

For example, you might think that people will think you’re acting “too big for your britches.” Yet the tradeoff of putting

yourself out there is the satisfaction you gain—and the benefits to your employer—of allowing your true talents to shine. Or you may think, “I’m not the self-promoting type.” Yet the tradeoff that comes from promoting yourself is that you get more interesting assignments and play a larger role in your business.

So acknowledge your resistance, and then continue on your journey, one step at a time.

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## FACING YOUR FEARS BY ACTING “AS IF”

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If you’re afraid to take that next step, it’s ok to act “as if.” Act “as if” you can run that meeting, write that report, lead that conference call. Do it, and get it done. When it’s over, you’ll be surprised at what you were able to accomplish in spite of your apprehension, and how good it feels to have stepped up to the challenge.

When you encounter a challenge that you hesitate to face, acknowledge it, and then do it anyway, acting “as if” you will succeed. As they say in sports, “Fake it till you make it.” Congratulate yourself for taking a risk that spurred your growth.

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## EMBRACE YOUR OWN GREATNESS

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You’ve probably heard this quote, which is often attributed to Nelson Mandela but which actually originated with spiritual author Marianne Williamson:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond  
measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that  
most frightens us.*

Becoming your own mentor means allowing yourself to unearth your own greatness. As Mandela said in his 1994

inaugural address, “Our playing small doesn’t serve the world.” We don’t have to shrink so that other people won’t feel insecure around us. When we allow our own voices to be heard, we give other people permission to use theirs. When we liberate our own fear, our very presence automatically liberates others.

If we can become our own mentors, life becomes more interesting because we look at events for what they can teach us rather than how they are going to “make us crazy.” And then, as Cheri Huber, author of *The Fear Book*, writes, “‘I can’t’ becomes ‘What’s next?’”

## SUMMING UP

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1. Like Julie, you can give yourself permission to do what is necessary and ethical to become your own best advocate in the workplace.
2. Being your own mentor is a role you grow into by honoring your own innate wisdom and by adopting a self-employed attitude.
3. Tapping the mentor within begins when you view your work in the context of your career/life dream.
4. Having a mission and related goals can clarify work- and career-related decisions. The choices either support your mission and goals, or they don’t.
5. All people face obstacles when they say yes to their dreams. Resistance (which can also manifest as feeling the goal is “just not that important anymore”) is natural. Find ways to work with it, for example, by acting “as if.”

6. Sometimes we are more afraid of our own greatness than of our own failings. Embrace that greatness. Instead of saying “I can’t,” ask “What’s next?”

## ACTION PLAN

Begin your self-mentoring journey by choosing from the following activities.

### **For extroverts:**

Create a three- to five-person professional development support group. Do the eulogy activity (see below) as an ice-breaker. Discuss how everyone in the group can be a mentor to themselves and each other, how often to meet, how long, how the meetings will be organized, and what the ground rules will be. Consider developing a creed for the group. Here’s an example of a creed created by NetWalkers, a group of female entrepreneurs in Northern Virginia who meet monthly to walk, share breakfast, and talk shop.

### **THE NETWALKER CREED**

This we agree to do:

- Commit to full participation in the group. Barring emergencies, we give at least two days’ notice if we cannot attend a scheduled meeting.
- Create trust. We accept what a member says as her truth rather than attacking or judging her.
- Honor confidentiality. We respect each other’s privacy. We strive for harmony.
- Give advice only when asked. We recognize that sometimes people just need to be heard.
- Give support at every opportunity. Most important: listen deeply.

**For introverts:**

Make a promise to yourself (or develop a creed) for how you will support yourself as you learn to become your own mentor. Consider doing one of the following exercises:

1. Draw your own tombstone and imagine your career as full and satisfying. What legacy have you left? What will be inscribed on your tombstone that describes your legacy?
2. Write the awards speech your company will deliver at your retirement. What accomplishments will you be remembered for?

**For all:**

Draft a personal mission statement and preliminary goals. Then peek ahead to Chapter 6 and learn how to create a success plan that will help you on your journey.