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Mentors offer unique career support

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By Lee Miller

Donna Cill, assistant dean for student affairs at UMDNJ-School of Nursing, is a strong believer in the value of mentors. Good mentors, she says, “can affect the trajectory of your career.”

While pursuing her bachelor of science in nursing, Cill met a woman who would have a tremendous impact on her life. Professor Diane Greene had a reputation for having extremely high standards making it “nearly impossible to get an A in her class.”

Not letting that scare her off, Cill sought out Greene to gain the benefit of her experience. Green inspired her and helped her to gain confidence. She pointed out things about Cill that she hadn't even realized herself. With Green's guidance, she decided to become a family nurse practitioner, a decision that turned out to be an excellent career move, positioning her to become a leader at UMDNJ-School of Nursing.

To this day, Cill keeps, in a prominent place in her office, a picture Green gave her of an angel hovering over a community as “a daily reminder of her best-ever mentor and her ongoing determination to make a difference in people's lives.”

A few weeks ago, I attended a discussion by the authors of a recently published study titled “The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling.” The panel dealt with the role “sponsors” play in facilitating career advancement, especially for women.

Sponsors differ from mentors in that mentors offer advice and serve as role models, but sponsors go a step further and become advocates for you. They help you gain exposure to higher-level executives and push for you to obtain critical assignments and promotions. Sponsors are important for both men and women.

Before the program, I had the opportunity to speak with one of the study's authors, Kerrie Peraino, chief diversity officer for American Express. I asked Peraino for her thoughts on how best to get and use mentors and sponsors.

She offered the following advice: “Start by being good at what you do.” Then, “don't be afraid to showcase your efforts, ask for feedback and seek out new assignments.” She also suggests raising your profile by “volunteering for projects and activities outside of your primary area of responsibility.”

Professor Bruce Bachenheimer, director of entrepreneurship at Pace University, offers the following guidance on managing the mentor relationship:

“Do some research before seeking a mentor — to help find an appropriate candidate and to be able to ask that person to serve as a mentor in a meaningful way.

“Once you have a mentor, be sure to demonstrate that you value the relationship and are taking affirmative action (i.e. not just saying “thanks” regularly, but really letting the mentor know the efforts are worthwhile).

“Always try to find ways to reciprocate — to demonstrate your gratitude and commitment. Little things that may be of assistance to the mentor can go a long way.”

Other experts also emphasize the importance of making the relationship reciprocal. Wendy May, head of communications at Zurich Global, recounted that she had benefited from having several strong and successful mentors over her career. So when she was asked to be a mentor herself, she “felt it was an opportunity to pay it back.”

What she didn’t realize was how much a mentor gains from the experience.

“It’s not about creating the next generation of ‘mini-me,’” she said. “Working with people earlier in their careers means they challenge your way of thinking and keep your outlook fresh so you don’t become set in your ways.

“Whether you’re mentoring or being a mentee, it’s should be a ‘real win-win’ for everyone.” When it comes to achieving career success, each of us have had people in our lives that have helped us along the way, offering advice, encouragement and support. If we are fortunate, we find sponsors who will advocate on our behalf so that we get a chance to demonstrate what we are capable of doing.

They propose us for key assignments that will showcase our talents. They put our name forward when promotional opportunities arise. If you are lucky, you have the good fortune to have people step forward to become mentors and sponsors. If you are strategic, however, you won’t leave that to chance but will seek out the right mentors and sponsors and will earn their support.

A veteran human resources executive, Lee E. Miller is a career coach and the author of “UP: Influence Power and the U Perspective—The Art of Getting What you Want.”