

What makes a great mentor?

Here are the qualities and actions of great iMentor mentors. The NYC iMentor program also utilizes this document during mentor training to encourage mentors to think through the qualities and actions they already have as well as those they could work towards. Feel free to adapt the content for your specific program or training needs.

A great mentor's key qualities:

Patience: Mentoring a young person is hard work. It can take months for your mentee to develop trust in you and trust in the mentoring experience. While change is absolutely possible, change still takes time. A great mentor understands it's worth the wait.

Unconditional support: When a mentee must make a decision, mentors offer advice and guidance. A great mentor understands the decision is ultimately the mentee's and will be supportive of the mentee no matter what decision the mentee makes.

Honesty: When mentors are honest about their own mistakes and failures, they help the mentee understand that even the most successful people make mistakes and learn from them. A great mentor is always honest with his mentee in order to help the mentee make good choices. This includes offering feedback on both negative and positive choices, actions and behaviors.

Fun: Being fun will motivate your mentee to get to know you. Fun and humor helps mentees be more open to the mentoring experience and can be a catalyst for closeness between the mentor and mentee. Be silly. Tell jokes. Use self-deprecating humor.

Consistency: Mentees crave consistency in their lives. Great mentors are consistent whether or not the mentee has learned to be consistent yet. It's this consistency that leads to mentees building trust in their mentors. Come to every event you say you will, email every week, no matter what.

A great mentor's key actions:

Use program staff's expertise: iMentor believes that mentors shouldn't have to help their mentees alone. In fact, great mentors are ones who contact their Program Coordinator whenever they are unsure of what to do. Since 1999, iMentor has developed best practices and strategies that help mentors have the greatest impact on mentees.

Connects mentees to resources and opportunities: Great mentors go out of their way to connect mentees to people, services, experiences, and other opportunities that will help the mentee towards success.

Develops candor by going first: It can be uncomfortable to be candid sometimes. This is true even more so for youth. However, candor leads to trust and trust is a key ingredient to a successful mentorship. Demonstrate the appropriate amount of candor with your mentees by

sharing about yourself without waiting to be prompted by your mentee. When you are candid with your mentee, it prompts your mentee to be candid with you and a trusting relationship is built.

Breaks big goals into discreet steps: Mentees don't always know how to break big goals into smaller achievable steps. A great mentor finds opportunities to celebrate each step towards a goal, no matter how small. This helps mentees have faith that they can get to where they want to be.

Teaches and models resilience: Whether a mentee has already learned to be resilient in the face of adversity or not, a great mentor teaches and models resiliency so that the mentee is continuously inspired to keep keeping on. When mentees fail, help them to bounce back. When you see them bounce back, remind them that they have.

Holds mentee to high expectations: A great mentor expects their mentee to achieve greatness. Having high expectations is an easy way to assure mentees that they are able to succeed.

Cultivates great conversations by listening and asking questions: The best way to really help a mentee is by learning about who they are, what they fear and what they hope for. Mentees won't always tell you things they would like to unless you ask them first. The best way to do that is to listen to what's being said (and what's not being said) and to get as much information from them as possible by asking questions.

Remembers him/herself as a teenager: It's very easy to forget what it is like to be a teenager. While a mentor may have had a very different childhood than the mentee, a great mentor remembers the universals and uses that memory to put things in perspective as he/she prepares the mentee for adulthood. (Universals include the exploration of identity, the transition from childhood to adulthood, the new development of abstract thinking, the realization that adults are imperfect, emotionality, etc.)

Holds self to high expectations: A great mentor adopts a "does whatever it takes" perspective. Mentoring is a difficult job. Great mentors understand this and are up to the job because they understand how much the mentees need great mentors.

Have another quality or action you would add to this list? Add it in the comments below.
