

Distinctions: Mentors, Advisory Boards and Family Advice-Givers

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Question	Mentor	Advisory Board	Family
<i>Who is it?</i>	Older, wiser, you respect, knows people or your business.	Business people you know and respect.	Any nosy relative with an opinion.
<i>Number?</i>	Have several your whole career; no relationship to each other; may not be known to others; open duration.	From areas you believe your business either needs help, or can take you in the direction your business is pointed. Think: Marketing, finance, operations, systems, people, politics, law; some relationship to your industry is a plus. Keep it small, 3-5.	Look at your family tree. Add in-laws. Oy.
<i>Formal?</i>	Not necessarily. “Can I call you from time to time?” People generally love to help; some resist thinking of themselves as mentors. Some companies set up formal mentor programs. Better if YOU pick yours.	Yes. You invite them. They know this is a formal commitment; that they’re willing to meet several times a year and think about/work with you in between when you have questions. They have a 2- to 3-year appointment; better to have staggered appointments so you get continuity.	They are always with you.

<i>Meet?</i>	Maybe. Phone, lunch, golf, Rotary meetings. It's an ad hoc relationship.	Yes, generally once a quarter, more if the business needs it. The meeting can last from 2 hours to a day. You'll figure out what you need. 2 to 4 hours is standard. It <i>begins</i> with you educating them on your business. It <i>becomes</i> helping you solve business problems.	Not if you can avoid it.
\$?	No; they do it because they've been where you are and understand how valuable help like this can be.	Yes. But if you're young, eager and full of promise, they might do it for nothing. Advisory Board members typically get from \$2,000 to \$15,000 a year for their service, even small companies, so be sure you feel they add value. If anyone has to travel, you pay the freight.	They're happy to advise you for free.
<i>Playing Level?</i>	Bigger than you; but someone who can relate to where you are, what you're doing.	You want "been there, done that." If they're too big, they don't understand your problems. If they're smaller than you (unless they're geniuses about to be HUGE), they're learning off of you.	Anyone who's breathed on a <i>Wall Street Journal</i> believes he's the expert for you.
<i>Desired Flavor of Relationship? (CRITICAL)</i>	Pick what works for you. If the creative genius is a jerk, but you respond well, that's the right person. If you like tough, but fair and results-oriented, go with that one. If you feel diminished or depressed after an encounter, find someone new. It's not how great they are. It's how you respond to them. Beware of soft, of someone who's kind and understands you, but only makes you feel better. You want someone who inspires your forward action.		Family gossip; summer BBQs; sports talk.

<i>Right approach?</i>	Respect the mentor's time. Get to the point, ask the question, bottom-line it as quickly as you can. It's a good discipline. THEN you can give any detail the mentor needs.	Don't ONLY ask, "What should I do?" Imagine they've told you: "Don't bring me problems; bring me solutions." So: What's the issue? What are you thinking of doing about it? What are the alternative solutions? What do you need from them? They'll give you better help. Nobody knows your business better than you. Don't ask them to do your thinking for you.	Ask about the kids and the golf game and their perky job.
<i>Topics?</i>	Unless you develop a close, personal relationship with a mentor, they want you to stick to business. It's great if they want to know more than "How are the kids?" but don't expect it.	You will share financials, goals, problems, where you're stuck (marketing, cash flow, dealing with banks or suppliers, taking the next big step). Regarding personal issues, you're a family business, and family often enters the discussion: Why are you building the business? Who's in it with you? What do your kids have to do with your business, today or in the future? Who helped capitalize you and what's their role/function?	See above.
<i>Advice not useful?</i>	You are under no obligation to take any of it. In fact, your gut is the best judge for you. Trust it. Hear advice, appreciate it, take part-all-or-none of it, and do what feels right for your business. If your advisors NEVER seem on the mark for you, they aren't the right ones for you. They may be correct, just not pointing in the direction you want to go. Take what IS good and run with it, however.	Don't request it.	
<i>Trust?</i>	You will be trusting these people with treasured information about you and your company. You must be able to be candid, and to get candor back from them. You must ask for and expect them to keep your information confidential. If they betray your trust, end the relationship.	Notoriously leaky.	

In Defense of Family Members as Advisors

You may have in your family sphere the brightest, best educated, super businessperson whom you love and trust, whose company you would choose without being required, and who has a keen interest in helping you succeed. By all means, DO use that person as a mentor, maybe on your Advisory Board. Remember, though, the family dynamic can be tricky; and – while theoretically forever – is fluid and subject to craziness and influences you may not want. When you're in the advice-gathering mode, put the business first, make sure the family mentoring passes the trust test, and know from the beginning how to end the business side of the relationship if it doesn't work for you.

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