How to Be a Good Mentor:
7 General Guidelines

Keep an Open Mind: You may have visualized the "type" of mentee you'd be best suited to help, but realize that a mentee doesn't have to be a younger you in order to learn from the situation. As long as you've mastered a particular body of knowledge or skill that your mentee needs, it doesn't matter if they're in a different industry or role.

Only Make Promises You Can Keep: At the beginning of your engagement, you and your mentee should set up a schedule of when and where to meet, and both of you should understand expectations in terms of discussion topics and outcomes. Trust may be the most critical aspect of a mentoring relationship, so once you commit, be reliable.

Listen Actively: While your mentee may be perfectly happy with you doing all the talking, you'll be more effective if you ask open-ended questions about what they're looking for and listen carefully to the answers. It's not all about you and what you've achieved, but rather how those experiences can be leveraged for the benefit of your mentee's professional growth.

Criticize Constructively: Many mentors fall into the trap of being either too harsh or too gentle. While you don't want to lose your patience with your mentee, you owe it to them to diplomatically broach areas for improvement. Deliver feedback by first asking for permission to do so, and then saying: "You're doing such a great job with X. I'd like to see you get even better by doing Y."

Encourage Action: Ideally, your engagement should help your mentee get from one career place to another. While being a sounding board is terrific, presumably you have a mentorship vision to fulfill. At the end of each meeting, give your mentee a few to dos, and then follow up with them about how things worked out.

Learn from Your Mentee: A strong mentoring relationship goes both ways. Even senior executives have much to learn. In some areas, your mentee might have valuable wisdom and advice to impart to you, so don't discount their ideas for enhancing your business and potential.

Show That You Care: Put yourself in your mentee's shoes and recall how difficult it was to confront certain career issues. Show that you're a little vulnerable by sharing mistakes you've made in the past, be a positive role model, and consult with others if you don't have the answers. In other words, give the mentorship everything you've got. You won't regret it.

These guidelines were developed by Alexandra Levit, '98, business and workplace author, speaker, and consultant. She can be found at www.alexandralevit.com.