

The Case for Learning From More Experienced Colleagues

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I often think about what I could have done better in the past—and how. As I look back on the last 30-plus years of my career, I recognize that if I had listened to or asked questions of those who came before me—my seniors, my alumni—my experience may have been a lot less painful.

Here are beneficial ways you can gain skills and knowledge from experienced colleagues.

When you first start at a company, listen.

As the newest employee, you will know the least about how the organization works together. Still, if you approach each encounter with the [intent to listen](#) for at least the first five seconds, there will be more people willing to share their knowledge with you.

Trade stories.

When I served in the Navy, a lot of knowledge was shared through what we called “telling sea stories.” Sea stories are lessons shared or taught informally between two people or a small group of people. These stories are a mixture of truth with a little bit of exaggeration for entertainment value. When you hear someone share an experience or tell a story, listen, because this is an environment where the person telling the story wants to share the *lessons* they learned. Take advantage of the downtime to [engage with your co-workers](#), especially the ones who’ve been in the organization longer.

Don’t be afraid to ask questions.

And remember that no questions are silly. If you have a question, there is a chance that another one of your coworkers has the same question. If you are hesitant [asking questions in a group meeting](#), take the question to one of the more experienced members on your team after the meeting or raise it in a one-on-one conversation. Not only will that get your question answered, but it will help you build genuine connections at work and learn from your peers. They may also see you as someone who wants to learn, which may open doors for you for future opportunities.

Find a mentor.

If someone is retiring or has been with an organization for a long time, it is most likely that they have seen remarkable changes. They have learned what to do as well as what not to do. Seeking out someone with experience as a [mentor](#) is invaluable. In my experience, I did not have my best mentors assigned to me. My best mentors were ones whom I admired and had a respectful, non-reporting relationship with.

One year into my first post-Navy contractor position, I felt very frustrated in my job and was considering leaving the company. I spoke to one of our company vice presidents whom I did not work for, but I considered a mentor. After several discussions, I decided to stay with the company and sought out additional responsibilities to learn how to build the business and to increase my chances for promotion. Six years after I had sought his advice, I had succeeded and moved up in the company from consultant to division manager position with 28 personnel over six subcontracts. A mentor can provide you the best guidance and feedback when you are not a direct report to them. Candid discussions with a mentor are invaluable and respected as private. The tough talks are best when you can have open conversations, especially when you can talk in confidence.

You will learn more as you get more experienced. Do not pass up a chance to learn from those who have come before you. They were in your position before, fought the battle to succeed, and you can, too.

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