ASME Mentoring Program

7 Questions

to Ask a Potential Mentor —and How Mentors Can Prepare Their Answers

A TOPIC-BY-TOPIC GUIDE TO HELP BOTH SIDES FIND THE RIGHT FIT.





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SETTING THE STANDARD

Stilted conversation and misaligned expectations aren't only the hallmark of bad first dates, but also poorly matched mentors and mentees.

In fact, the thought of suffering a mismatch is enough to keep some from joining mentorship programs entirely. But before you swear off mentorship entirely — or cross your fingers and let Lady Luck take the wheel — consider that finding the right fit can be as simple as asking a few thoughtful questions.



And when the fit is right, the result can be downright magical:

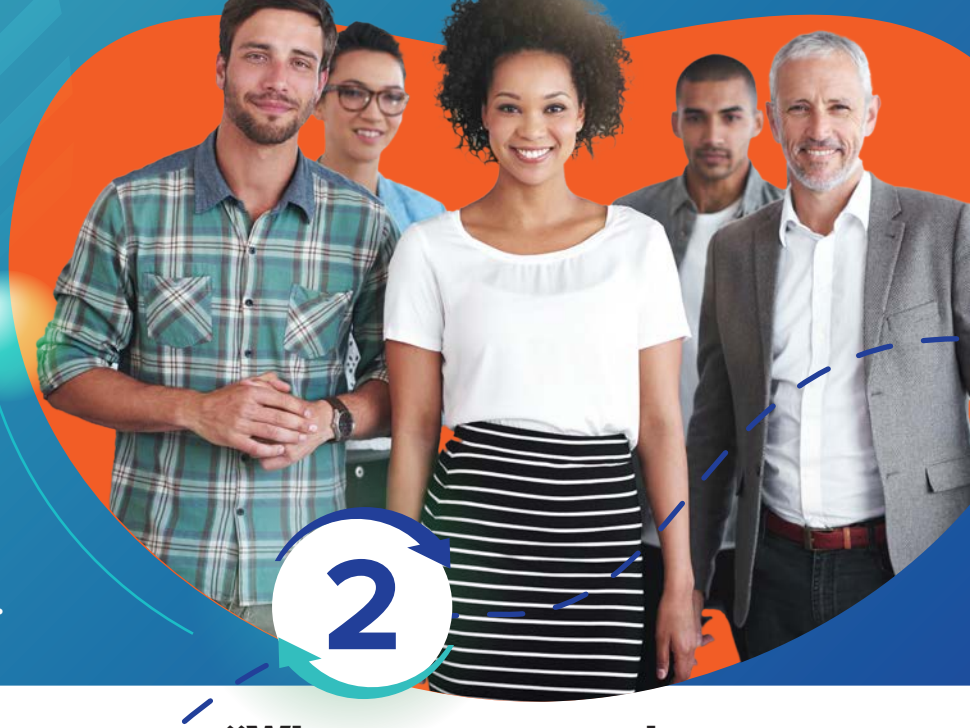
Newer engineers get supportive guidance on everything from career ambitions to technical troubleshooting, and more senior professionals get to flex their leadership and communication skills while giving back. Sounds pretty appealing, right?

Here are the questions mentees may want to ask when meeting with a potential mentor (as well as pointers for mentors on how to put their best foot forward when responding).

KEEP IN MIND:

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions below.

This conversation is all about assessing whether the pairing is right for you.



1

"What do you think are some of the most useful skills an engineer can possess?"

MENTEES

This is your chance to assess how prepared you might be for the road ahead and, crucially, to determine which areas you still need to work on. Pay close attention to your mentor's answer—particularly if they work in the area you'd like to pursue since they're likely telling you exactly what you need to be successful in that sector.

MENTORS

The key here isn't to talk only about the skills you've found useful in your own career, but to also discuss the skills you've admired in others along the way. What made them extraordinary? How did you see those skills play out in their work and relationships?

Talk about your a for growth and how having that skill might have made your path a little easier to traverse. It's also particularly helpful to offer a few pointers on improving the skills you're discussing if your mentee feels they're not fully competent. Should they take a learning and development course? Shadow someone in the field? Concrete pointers go a long way.

2

"What was your path to your current position?"

MENTEES

This question is a great way to get a sense of how a career tends to unfold, which can be illuminating for students who may not have thought past landing their first position out of school. Note any stumbling blocks, bad decisions, or shifts in focus. These are often telling details. They indicate some of the many ways we tend to figure out what doesn't work for us professionally—which is just as important as knowing what does. And make special note of the ways your mentor landed each position. Was it all about networking? Was it about who they knew, who they studied with, where they lived? This is all valuable intel.

MENTORS

This is a chance to get very specific with your mentee about the ways life, profession, chance, and a strong network tend to intersect in this field. How did you get each position? What were some of the mistakes you made or misconceptions you had? How did you learn that you were mistaken or that you had misunderstood? Who helped you along the way? Who didn't? The more detailed you can be, the more your mentee will get a real-world sense of how careers progress—an understanding that simply can't be taught in an educational setting.

More for You:
6 Nontechnical Skills Engineers Need





3

“How do you deal with setbacks?”

MENTEES

This question can be immensely useful if you tend to struggle to overcome mistakes in your own work—and even if you don’t. After all, soon you will likely be taking on more difficult tasks once you enter the workforce, and learning how to manage disappointment is key. Notice that the phrasing of this question assumes that setbacks will happen—because they will. It’s less about avoiding mistakes and more about learning how to withstand them. Your mentor can help you do just that.

MENTORS

Now is your chance to tout the value of failure, which is the very thing that helps an engineer succeed. Failure isn’t something to avoid or fear—it’s the lifeblood of an engineering career, a natural and necessary part of the process. Make it clear to your mentee that you’ve failed, goofed, misjudged, misunderstood, and generally messed up many times in your career, and it’s exactly what made you the engineer you are today.

4

“Have you ever experienced impostor syndrome?”

MENTEES

It’s unfortunately common, particularly for women in STEM fields, to feel self-doubt about achievements and competence. However, engineers of any background or demographic can suffer from impostor syndrome. That’s why it’s important to learn to deal with and transcend these feelings early on in your career—before they have a chance to hold you back from your full potential.

MENTORS

When a mentee asks this question, it’s likely that they’re really asking if they’re the only one who feels this way—as though they’ve somehow wound up in this highly technical, highly elite field despite clearly being unqualified. It may be a while since you’ve felt this way (or it may not be!) but try to think about how you overcame the feeling or what helps you each time it crops up. Do you look back at your accomplishments? Do you seek advice from people whose opinion you respect? Whatever guidance you can offer is bound to be helpful—but perhaps none is as valuable as the assurance that everyone feels this way at some point or another.



More for You:

How to Make Mentoring Count

5

"How do you prevent errors in your work?"

MENTEES

In such a highly technical field, where every decimal point and degree matters, learning how to take your time and strive for maximum accuracy is an important component of your education. People do this in many different ways, from re-checking every calculation multiple times to asking for second and third pairs of eyes on their work. But your mentor can give you a sense of how they approach this ever-present concern and discuss it in detail.

MENTORS

This crucial aspect of engineering—achieving maximum possible accuracy—is often a skill that comes with time and experience. It can be helpful to explain this to your mentee, and to talk about your own experiences in honing accuracy over time. Was there a particular mistake that drilled into you the importance of slowing down and checking twice (or even thrice)? Have you found that entering a particular headspace during especially technical work helps you to stay focused? Is there a failsafe you've instituted in your own work, or that your company requires? All this information can be illuminating to a mentee.

6

"What are some of the most valuable lessons you've learned in your career?"

MENTEES

Your aim with this question is to get your mentor to distill some of the biggest and most pivotal moments of their career into nuggets of wisdom you can take with you—and you may be surprised by their answers.

MENTORS

This is your chance to hammer home the big picture stuff you'd like to share and cement the most imperative information you want your mentor to take from your time together. A few prompts to help you think back on your journey and turn those experiences into applicable wisdom: What was your greatest achievement, and how did you make it happen? What was your biggest disappointment, and how did you overcome it? What was the cause of that disappointment, and how have you avoided it since? What was the best advice you ever received during your career? Who was the person you most admired, and what qualities did they possess that you've tried to emulate?

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Podcast: What Engineering Students Need to Know to Succeed



7

"How do I determine the right path for me?"

MENTEES

This is a terrific question if you're feeling uncertain about which direction to take within the industry—and even if you're pretty sure you already know. Because as your mentor may tell you, many engineers find out that they don't fit as well into their chosen path as they expected. That can be a setback, but it can also be an opportunity. Your mentor may have advice to help you turn it into the latter.

MENTORS

No question gets to the heart of the matter like this one—this is the fundamental question on which all mentees need guidance. You may feel ill equipped to provide personal advice about a junior engineer's journey. But keep in mind that the answer to this question is less about the individual's interests or strengths than it is about 1) remaining flexible while acquiring more information about their chosen career, 2) keeping an open mind, and 3) taking opportunities as they come, even if they seem out of the realm of your intended trajectory. After all, that's often how one lands at the most interesting—and fruitful—stops on their journey.

Now it's time to put this guide to the test and find a mentor or mentee through the ASME Mentoring Program. You'll have access to traditional mentoring, group mentoring, guided learnings, and much more. Whether you're a young professional just starting your engineering journey or an established expert looking to give back, it can help you find new opportunities to continue your professional development.

Follow the program's separate tracks to develop your leadership skills and expand your network:

MENTOR TRACK

Mentors can select their mentees, upload availability, match with peers, or even join our Group Mentoring programs. With guided learnings offered throughout the mentorship journey, you can build and strengthen your leadership skills along the way.

MENTEE TRACK

This guided track allows you to connect with mentors, join discussion groups, and begin to expand your engineering network. Learn from others as you develop your professional plan and connect to the broader ASME community.

Become
a Mentor or Mentee, or both

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