

# Say Yes to Mentoring!

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP  
WHILE CLIMBING YOUR LADDER OF SUCCESS.**

**By Olya Kovnatska, CMA**

Life is a chain of experiences, some of which stand out more than others. I remember riding a bicycle for the first time like it was yesterday. The bike was a little too big for me, yet I was full of anticipation about my first ride with no training wheels. But being excited to accomplish something doesn't make it any less scary. Thankfully, the first few runs were going to involve Mom walking with me and helping me keep my balance while I gained enough confidence to try on my own.

As the first run began, she was holding the back of the seat and giving me those special words of encouragement only a mother can provide. Slowly pedaling forward, I began to feel more comfortable, and soon my speed increased to the point where I felt the breeze on my face. This was such a wonderful new feeling that I turned back to tell Mom how much fun I was having and thank her for safeguarding me. That's when I saw the tiny silhouette waving at me in the distance. Wait. If she's way back there, then who's keeping me upright? My mind froze. My body froze. Unfortunately, the bike didn't freeze—and down I went. When I picked myself up off the ground, my pain was a distant thought. In its place were two feelings: pride at what I had accomplished and surprise that it had happened so easily. It took many years to realize that this was one of my first encounters with mentoring. All it took was a push in the right direction, and then I did the rest. Thank you, Mom.

## New Opportunities to Grow

Parents help us grow so much, but when we enter the workplace, we're on our own. Too many of us, myself included, make the mistake of getting caught up in life—the daily routine, deadlines, running from point A to point B, trying to keep up with the demands of our busy schedules. We value professional growth, but who's willing to take the time and make the commitment? We all should. Working with mentors changed my life.

What I've learned and appreciate about mentoring is that it doesn't need to be formal or even face-to-face to be successful. The best thing is its flexibility! You can mold it into different shapes and forms that suit your needs.

When I started my career in management accounting as a regional finance analyst at United Rentals, Inc., the largest equipment rental company in the world, I didn't enroll in a formal mentoring program. Fortunately for me, it didn't stop my manager at that time, Regional Controller Alex Fridlyand, from becoming my first professional mentor and guiding me through the initial stages of my career development. Helping me excel at my day-to-day activities was never sufficient for Alex—he had a long-term strategy for my growth. Alex used to say that his job was “to open doors of opportunities” for me but then it was my job to walk through and take advantage of them. One of his methods was to volunteer me for projects outside our department. Luckily, when you work for a growing and innovative company, there's never a lack of initiatives. By helping with them, I was able to

## The roots of the word “mentor” come from Greek mythology.

Mentor, a character in Homer's epic tale the *Odyssey*, was a wise and loyal advisor entrusted to protect Odysseus's son, Telemachus, while Odysseus was away fighting the Trojan War. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, would also assume Mentor's form to guide, teach, and protect young Telemachus by providing him with prudent counsel and encouragement. Since then, wise and trusted advisors have been called “mentors.”

perform more advanced tasks and become exposed to different company functions and levels of management. Whether it was to aid our Financial Planning & Analysis (FP&A) team in redesigning our budgeting system, assist Accounting with the year-end close, or support the Operational Excellence group through piloting a new program, each of these projects expanded my horizons. I hadn't worked for a public company before and was eager to learn the complexities and dynamics of this fascinating new world.

## Enhancing Professional Knowledge

One of the most valuable doors that Alex opened for me led to my becoming a CMA® (Certified Management Accountant). As with the majority of his advice, this came rather unexpectedly. I had been promoted to senior regional financial analyst and was looking for additional ways to enhance my professional knowledge. During our annual performance review meeting, we were discussing finance and accounting books I was reading to sharpen my skills. Suddenly Alex's face lit up, and he suggested studying for a certification instead, emphasizing that “reading books is a process” while “getting a certification is an accomplishment” of which I could be proud. The more I thought about this, the more excited I grew.

Next came the million-dollar question: “Should I pursue a CPA or CMA certification?” I was certain Alex would want me to follow in his footsteps and become a CPA (Certified Public Accountant). Surprisingly, that wasn't what he said. When he asked our regional vice president which certification holder he would prefer to hire, “a CMA” was the response. Alex agreed that it was a perfect choice for me because I enjoy activities like finan-

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cial analysis, decision support, and planning—all parts of operational finance for a big corporation, which is what being a CMA is all about! In less than two years I earned my certification. Alex invited our whole office to my favorite restaurant to celebrate my new designation. I will always remember that special occasion as a formal tribute to our informal mentoring!

Feeling more confident about my technical knowledge after becoming a CMA, I decided it was time to focus on honing my public speaking skills since my new position involved giving frequent in-person and online presentations. I read numerous articles about public speaking, but I really needed someone to help and guide me. Where could I find an excellent public speaker who could take me under their wing? A few days later as I was checking e-mail I came across one from IMA® (Institute of Management Accountants) that immediately caught my eye. It was an announcement devoted entirely to IMA's pilot program for mentoring. Could this be the answer to my dilemma? I signed up immediately.

## Finding the Right Mentor

One of the most important aspects of IMA's mentoring program is that it allows an applicant to select a mentor rather than just the other way around. The website lists each mentor as well as his or her areas of expertise, which makes it easy for mentees to find the right match. In my case, I clicked on "Public Speaking" on the mentor search form, and the website displayed all the mentors who marked this proficiency in their profiles. I was thrilled to see the name Bud Kulesza pop up. I remembered Bud from an IMA Leadership webinar and was very impressed with his presentation. He stood out

because, while speaking, he demonstrated a level of confidence that I so desperately wanted when it was my turn to get up on stage. I also enjoyed the personal stories he shared to support his points. He wasn't a dry, here-are-the-facts-and-nothing-else presenter—he was exactly the type of speaker I wanted to be.

I e-mailed Bud, asking him to be my mentor. When he agreed, I felt as though I had won the lottery. A former IMA Chair and CFO of a multibillion-dollar company was going to be my mentor! There was one caveat though. While Alex worked with me in the same office, Bud and I wouldn't be talking face-to-face since we lived in different states. I must admit I was wondering how well a long-distance mentorship would work.

During our first monthly call, Bud asked me to come up with a list of my strengths and weaknesses. I found this self-assessment tool extremely beneficial and highly recommend it for all initial meetings with mentors. It made me realize that I wanted to improve more than my public speaking. At the same time, it provided us a roadmap to help guide my development. Time spent on this list up front will make mentoring more effective because it will allow your mentor to get to know you better and will ultimately enhance the quality of your results.

## Increasing Your Confidence

To help with my public speaking, Bud advised me to join Toastmasters International. I had heard about this organization but didn't have a clear picture of what it entailed. Now I see what all the fuss is about. The excellent structure of the program and the positive, supportive atmosphere created by club members has kept me coming back week after week to deliver a speech and watch

others do the same. I've been a member for two years now, and last winter I earned my first Communication and Leadership Awards. Time and effort that I've invested in Toastmasters have paid great dividends: I feel more relaxed and confident when I'm in front of an audience. And now I actually look forward to public speaking opportunities instead of shying away from them. Without my mentor's suggestion, this would have been impossible.

Joining Toastmasters was like discovering a hidden gem. I highly recommend it to anyone who's looking for a place to polish their public speaking, leadership, and communication skills. With more than 13,000 clubs worldwide, it's easy to find one near you that fits your schedule by using the Find a Club tool on the Toastmasters website at <http://reports.toastmasters.org/findaclub>. You can visit as many clubs and meetings as you want before making your decision. What I really enjoy about Toastmasters is how much emphasis they put on growth and development. If talking in front of your club members is no longer a challenge, you can step it up by taking part in different Toastmasters competitions. Last year I competed in an evaluation contest where all participants had to provide two to three minutes of feedback for the guest speaker. As frightening as it was to critique somebody, I saw for the first time that pushing myself outside my comfort zone was absolutely worth it. Now I can fully appreciate the saying, "There is no growth in the comfort zone; there is no comfort in the growth zone."

## Cultivating Leadership Skills

My next step was to get involved with my local IMA chapter (Portland Chapter) so I could meet finance specialists and further cultivate my leadership skills. If you want to jump-start your professional networking, look no further than a mentor who can make some introductions. Bud connected me with a former Chapter president who then introduced me to the rest of the team. I also attended a Chapter board meeting and soon after that was voted in as a new board member—VP of New Program Development. This position is important to me because I'm advocating IMA's mentoring program to our local members and helping them find a mentor or a mentee that best suits their needs. There are always obstacles to overcome when rolling out any new program, and I truly appreciate the support I receive from other board members. The passion they have for our organization is contagious and creates a flourishing environment for growth and success.

Volunteering with my local chapter has been very ful-

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filling. I can share my knowledge with others about the profession I love, help establish mentoring relationships for their further success, and use this as an additional avenue to practice my public speaking. Once again, following my mentor's suggestion brought me to a path I wouldn't have found on my own. That's why the trust between mentor and mentee is so crucial. It isn't enough just to listen to your mentor's ideas; as a mentee, you need to act on them. From my experience, when the advice makes your comfort zone feel a bit compromised, you're on the right track.

## The Essence of Mentoring

My participation in IMA's mentoring program has turned me into an avid proponent of long-distance mentoring: It really does work! I'm pleased to say that Bud is still my mentor, and last year I finally got to meet him in person. Thanks to our over-the-phone mentoring journey, I felt like I was catching up with an old friend I hadn't seen in a while. We continue our monthly calls where we discuss my progress at work, Toastmasters, and IMA. Every call concludes with the same question: "Is there anything else I can do to help?" This simple but powerful sentence manifests for me the essence of mentoring: It isn't about where you came from or currently are—it's where you want to go.

Mentoring has become increasingly popular among successful organizations. In fact, more than 70% of *Fortune* 500 and private companies use mentoring to attract, develop, and retain talent as well as boost productivity. My company is no exception. As a part of the United Rentals leadership development program—LIFT—I recently was assigned a formal mentor. LIFT stands for Leadership, Influence, Focus, and Teamwork—all areas where great leaders excel. This high-potential program immerses its participants in world-class leader-

## TIPS FOR MENTEES

- 1. Be Specific:** Know why you want a mentor.
- 2. Be Proactive:** Take the initiative to establish the mentoring relationship.
- 3. Be Global:** Don't limit yourself to an in-person relationship. Long-distance mentoring does work.
- 4. Be Honest:** Acknowledge and share your strengths and weaknesses so you can help design an effective development plan.
- 5. Be Organized:** Know what you want to accomplish, and schedule regular meetings.
- 6. Trust and Take Action:** Be confident in the process and brave enough to experience beyond your comfort zone.
- 7. Raise the Bar:** Periodically reassess your development plan and set new goals.

## TIPS FOR MENTORS

- 1. Make a Commitment:** Availability and accessibility are required; make the time.
- 2. Set Clear Expectations and Boundaries:** It's easy to lose focus without them.
- 3. Listen:** Understanding the concerns and situations takes close listening.
- 4. Learn:** Mentoring isn't one-sided—there is much a mentor can learn as well.
- 5. Challenge:** Mentors should challenge their mentees to make their own decisions while they provide guidance.
- 6. Have Fun:** Enjoy mentoring as you "pay it forward." Being a mentor is a most rewarding experience.

ship courses where we can explore our leadership skills in a safe and supportive environment. It also provides an organized, monthly platform for our company's senior leaders to share their approach for growing others. This opens up a new chapter in my professional life because I have the privilege of working with mentors inside and outside my workplace at the same time. Though this is unfamiliar territory for me, the synergy has amazing potential: I can be guided on how to better apply the new skills and knowledge that I'm gaining from Bud's mentorship to the specifics of my company. Embracing multiple mentoring opportunities can take you even further!

I believe that mentoring is a crucial catalyst for those who are interested in professional or personal growth. Certainly you can try to do it all on your own, but I've found that working with mentors provides me with the support, strategy, and structure that help me reach my destination faster. Furthermore, it makes my journey more rewarding, memorable, and enjoyable. Mentoring also inspires me to keep challenging myself so I can build the skills and confidence necessary for my future success. Having somebody in my corner who has already been there is the ultimate advantage that I'm so thankful for!

Formal or informal, professional or personal, long-distance or face-to-face—mentoring has been evolving to fit today's high-paced global environment. Each of us has benefited from mentoring throughout our lives. Whether it was our parents or a professional mentor, they were instrumental in helping us grow and achieve our aspirations. IMA's mentoring program is applicable to all professionals from students to CFOs. If you're interested in professional growth or simply a different point of view, take a few minutes and consider finding a mentor. If you're ready to give back, signing up as a mentor can be equally rewarding. Either step can dramatically change your life and perhaps someone else's. **SF**

**Note to IMA members:** To find out more about IMA's mentoring program, go to [www.imanet.org](http://www.imanet.org) and log in to your account. Then click on the Groups & Networking tab, then LinkUp IMA. Once you're on LinkUp IMA, click the Mentoring tab, where you'll find all the information you need to be a mentor or mentee.

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