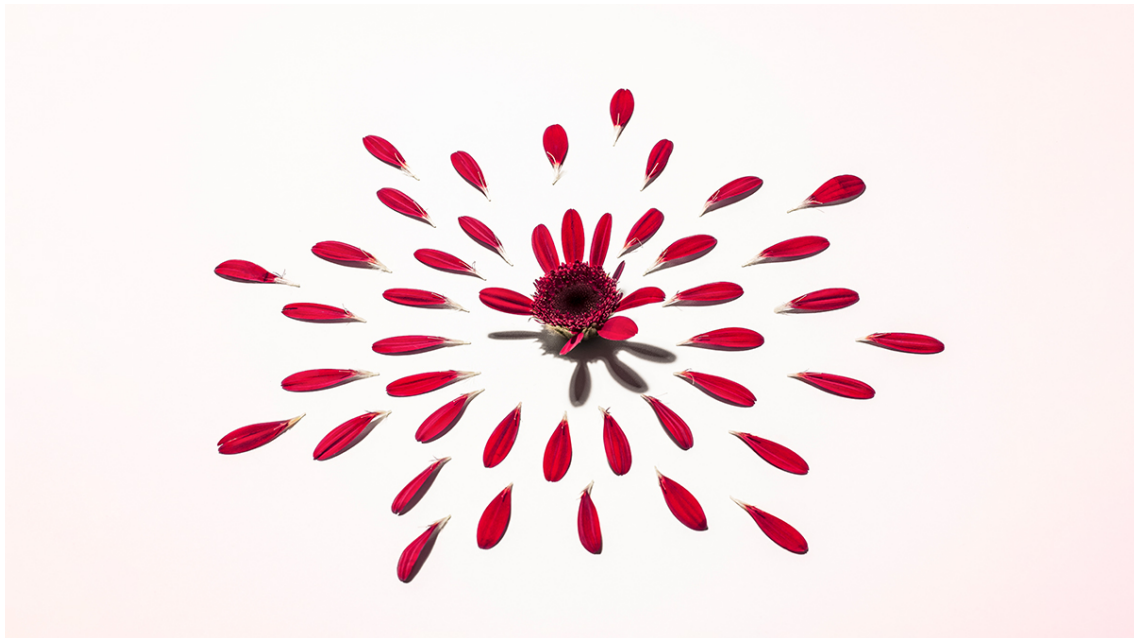


**Coaching**

# **What Great Mentorship Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace**

by Marianna Tu and Michael Li

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**Summary.** In a time of incredible change, professional disruption, and overwhelming loneliness, mentorship can anchor us. But how do we mentor in a remote, distributed workforce? Coming together online doesn't need to be the watered-down version of being together... [more](#)

Remote work has been an adjustment (to say the least) for everyone, and its effect on our professional relationships has been just as significant as the impact on daily tasks. For early-career employees,

the lack of casual conversations at work poses a considerable challenge. How does one learn best practices to succeed in one's career when you're working alone from home? How does one build the professional relationships that are critical for survival and advancement? On the organizational side, how does the business build a culture that supports diversity and inclusion initiatives in the middle of a pandemic? Based on our recent experience leading organizations focused on online mentorship, we believe an organizational commitment to mentorship can address all of these issues.

At America Needs You (ANY) (where Marianna serves as CEO and Michael served on the board), we fight for economic mobility and inclusion through a rigorous one-on-one mentoring and career development program for first-generation college students. We had to make a significant shift to our mentoring programs when they suddenly went virtual. At The Data Incubator (TDI), which Michael founded, we train the next generation of data scientists and have shifted our in-person training and mentorship to online programs. This moment of disruption has been the right time for us to build and support diverse talent from internships to the C-suite, and we'd like to share what has worked for us as we moved our mentorship programs from in-person to virtual programs.

Mentorship and sponsorship are critical to employee retention and satisfaction — especially for people of color and women, both of whom are more likely than others to report mentoring as very important to their career development. On the retention side, mentorship supports employee development and progression. On the recruiting side, involvement in undergraduate mentorship builds talent pipelines and provides access to students who are often excluded from traditional recruiting, such as students from a community college. Hiring mistakes and poor employee support are always costly, but the stakes are even higher in today's environment. Mentoring helps us avoid both.

Decades of research have given us strong indicators of what works. Researchers David Megginson and David Clutterbuck, cofounders of the European Mentoring Center (now the European Mentoring & Coaching Council) point to two components for effective mentoring: building rapport and creating clarity of purpose.

## **Building Rapport**

Rapport is what makes mentoring truly transformative and more than just an organizational responsibility. But it is also particularly challenging to build in a virtual world. We define rapport as mutual trust and respect, a shared understanding of one another's values and perspectives, and strong communication. The quality of this human connection is critical to retaining employees, especially for those who are underrepresented in your company or industry. A study conducted by Gartner and Capital Analytics at Sun Microsystems found much higher retention rates for mentees (72%) and mentors (69%) than other employees who did not participate in the mentoring program (49%). Here's how to go about building rapport:

### **Take a holistic mentoring approach.**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, our personal and professional worlds have steadily intruded into one another. Companies who embrace that reality will tend to keep their best people while others lose great talent.

At ANY, we found that the key to building rapport was explicitly telling mentor-mentee pairs that it they were not only allowed, but encouraged, to talk about things other than work and academics. We also named new virtual norms that embrace a holistic approach, such as “you never have to apologize for interruptions from children and pets” to ease the stress of digital interactions. This sort of mentoring acknowledges an important truth: work/life balance is a myth; it's all just life, and work is one part of our lives. The inability to separate the two is rendered all the more evident as we work from crowded homes with childcare demands clearly evident in the background.

Mentorship helps individuals connect their deeper human motivations and values to their careers, and aligning these two will pay dividends to employers and employees alike. According to Gallup, nearly 85% of employees worldwide are still not engaged or are actively disengaged at work, despite greater effort from companies. Loneliness is a concurrent pandemic, with 65% of young people in a recent University of Miami study reporting increased loneliness since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and 80% reporting “significant depressive symptoms.”

Mentoring can help us stay resilient and connected in the face of these challenges. Different employers may need to draw different lines between their personal and private lives, and the exact relationship will ultimately be up to the mentor and mentee. But acknowledging how much our personal and professional lives are intersecting is a powerful basis for any mentoring relationship.

### **Ditch the happy hour in favor of one-on-one relationships.**

Instead of focusing on individual relationships, many companies have tried to manage connection during the pandemic through virtual group social events and happy hours, only to have attendance plummet after a few months. Many report fatigue around virtual group events.

Investing time in meaningful, deep connections with individuals one-on-one can be a refreshing change and a chance for more authentic connection. Guided dialogue and discussion questions will help mentoring pairs uncover their common humanity — no matter how different they may seem on the surface. At TDI, we have found that maintaining regular virtual one-on-ones provides a unique opportunity for building rapport that isn't possible in large group settings.

One of our most impactful virtual mentoring activities at ANY is having one person speak for three uninterrupted minutes about their life story. These 180 seconds are profound; many cannot remember

when they truly listened or were listened to for that long. People who were strangers moments ago learned about some of each other's critical life moments, as people have shared stories about the pain of professional or personal rejection, and other challenges in their lives. You cannot talk meaningfully about careers without talking about the source of our motivations, about family, and about life's highs and lows.

### **Offer multiple modalities for connection.**

People have different preferences for communication mediums, which often fall along generational lines. Provide guidelines and options for communication (for example, by showing people how to use Slack or Zoom, or providing guidance about whether texting is encouraged or discouraged). Then, let mentoring pairs try and see what works for them.

At ANY, one of the first things our pairs do is create a mentoring "Communications and Expectations Plan" where they talk about how and when they'd like to check-in. Teach people how to use technology in ways that build connection, such as coaching mentor/mentee pairs on using annotations and reactions in video chats or providing links to online assessments, tools, and games that they can complete together.

### **Embrace the advantages (and question the presumed limitations) of remote connection.**

Coming together online doesn't need to be the watered-down version of being together in-person; some things are actually better because of — not in spite of — being remote. Remote mentoring can promote equity and build relationships free from the biases we face in person, when we know another's height, physical ability, or pregnancy status, to name a few examples.

Without the limiting factor of geographic proximity, you can expand your pool to make great matches that prioritize shared interests and values over logistics. You might find that by embracing the tools you

have, you can build something even more robust than before.

Train people on how to use technology to build connection and encourage digital skill sharing. Remember that being virtual doesn't mean you can't use physical objects or movement. Mailing a physical item can provide a much-needed tactile anchor. Mentor/mentee pairs can open a package and enjoy the contents together (cookies, notebooks, company swag, etc.) No budget? You can each find a similar object in your respective homes (have a cup of coffee together) or do your check-ins while each taking a walk.

## **Clarity of Purpose**

Infusing a clear sense of purpose in the mentor/mentee relationship creates excitement and momentum to solidify the relationship. Without it, mentorships can become nice friendships, but will not help employees reach their goals. To create clarity of purpose:

### **Create benchmarks and celebrate wins.**

Humans are storytellers, and we need a narrative to make sense of our life's events. Mentoring pairs who spend time saying, "This is where we started, this is how far we've come, and this is where we're going," will build resilience to persevere through challenges. Pairs should set and check-in on goals, and should create a public or semi-public forum to share progress. While these forums may have happened informally in the office, companies need to proactively foster digital equivalents in a remote office.

Posting videos and pictures of wins, and actively engaging with public or private online forums, can promote a culture of celebration. Graphics, music, and videos can mark milestones — for example, one of ANY's sites changed their traditional matching ceremony into a video with pictures of each pair, and we've seen organizations effectively use online compliment books or "word clouds" to inspire each other. At ANY, we also hold an open forum for "Public and Private Victories" at the end of every workshop to verbally celebrate accomplishments, share lessons learned, and publicly thank others for

support. Mentor/mentee pairs have taken to continuing the tradition over Slack after the workshop is over. Many of our employees and mentees have taken versions of this practice to the organizations they have subsequently joined.

At TDI, we borrow a page from Silicon Valley and use a “daily stand-up” to provide students with an opportunity to talk about what they have learned and where they have gotten stuck. Standups help unlock potential collaboration, allow students to track progress (and maintain accountability), and provide a venue to showcase wins in the arduous journey to data science mastery.

### **Ground mentoring in organizational values.**

Make it clear why you’re encouraging mentoring and why it matters to the organization. Are you providing space to talk about career goals, and/or to practice and develop skills? Grounding the overall goals of the mentoring program in your company’s values in virtual mentoring can help strengthen a shared corporate culture even when employees don’t have a shared office.

At ANY, the workshops iterate between teaching career and leadership skills to mentees and allowing time for the mentor and mentee to provide their individual context and strengthen any important skills. We argue that a similar model can work in companies, centered on teaching corporate values and contextualizing them between the mentor and mentee. If your goal is community, ask the mentoring pairs to think about how they can each build it and what role they tend to play in their communities. If a value is innovation and creativity, ask your pairs to redesign a process and learn from each other while doing so.

### **Provide consistency and structure.**

Many mentoring programs spend a lot of time matching at the beginning and evaluating at the end, without a clear structure on how to engage throughout the mentoring relationship. In a virtual world, having a standing time for mentorship is essential. (At ANY and TDI,

we suggest weekly check-ins.) Consistency builds trust. Showing up for each other builds trust. ANY gives our pairs virtual modules, many of which are a video or article with a set of discussion questions to facilitate conversation. Having a structured starting place will often lead to interesting, specific, and relevant discussions.

### **Collaborate in real time**

Don't just talk about goals; work on them together. Embrace the power of screen sharing, which is great for visual learners and allows for collaboration. Resist the instinct for mentors to always share, and put mentees in the driving seat — mentors will see how mentees are performing, and may learn something as well. Synchronous work tools such as Padlet and Google docs can help to increase efficiency and satisfaction as pairs see their joint progress.

### **Mentoring Will Lead Us Forward**

In a time of incredible change, professional disruption, and overwhelming loneliness, mentorship can anchor us. The connection and meaning it can bring through rapport and clarity of purpose is critical to supporting people through turmoil, and it can strengthen relationships across one's organization. While it is intuitive to most that mentorship will help new employees on the job, the impact on those providing the mentoring is often overlooked. Successful mentorship is much more about active listening than giving one-way advice, and when approached from a place of reciprocity, there are substantial benefits to mentors.

At ANY, we surveyed hundreds of professionals who worked with first-generation college students through our mentoring and career development program. Over 90% reported that their experience as a mentor helped them become a better leader or manager at work. Indeed, developing skills to build rapport or purpose in relationships is directly applicable to critical concepts such as situational leadership, in which appropriate assessment of an employee and a specific situation's needs helps get results for all. For leaders who feel mentoring is one more thing they can't focus on right now, we



encourage you to see this powerful tool as something that can liberate you and empower your workforce to support one another — and we hope you find purpose in doing so.

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