

Building Mentor Relationships



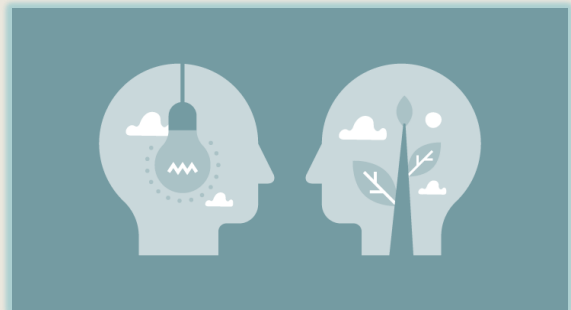
Finding the Right Mentor isn't a Secret to Success – it's Essential.

Learning from someone else's experiences and perspectives is an invaluable opportunity to make strides as a breeder. Whether you're planning your very first breeding, or you're several years into your breeding program, a mentor can help you look at your goals and your dogs from a different perspective.

So Exactly What Does a Mentor Do?

A mentor can help you stay focused on your goals. When we're immersed in the day-to-day work of breeding and raising dogs, it's important to have someone who can help to focus you when you get off track. Mentors can help you identify assets and faults in your own dogs, offer suggestions to allow you to work through challenges as they come up, and help you avoid breeding pitfalls that they may have experienced themselves.

A mentor can serve as a sounding board at critical points throughout your breeding efforts. They can provide feedback on lesser-known dogs and bloodlines in your pedigrees, help you assess the pluses and minuses of possible stud dogs and make introductions to other breeders whose bloodlines might be complimentary to yours.



What Makes a Good Mentor?

A mentor offers a brain to pick, and ear to listen and a push in the right direction. At the most basic level, mentors should have more breeding experience than you along with a track record of success. They might be someone you envision yourself to become one day. Mentors should be able and willing to offer you a different perspective – something you might not notice or think of on your own.

A good mentor is supportive but honest. You want someone who is willing to invest their time and expertise to help you grow as a breeder, but also be willing to speak the truth to you. Sometimes you'll need a reality check on the strengths and faults of a favorite dog, while other times you need a pat on the back for producing a litter of high-quality puppies. A good mentor should provide both.

Building Mentor Relationships, continued



What Are Your Goals?

The first step to find a mentor is defining what you want to accomplish with your breeding program. Focus on the quality of your dogs vs wins you hope to achieve. Defining what you want will give you and your mentor a clear path forward. It may help to identify breeders whose dogs you admire, specific attributes of those dogs you want to put on your dogs, etc. as part of this process.

Ready to Find Your Mentor?

While you may find a mentor in your same coat variety and size to start, be open to anyone in the breed if you feel their experience, accomplishments and approach can help you achieve your goals. Your mentor could be someone you already know, the breeder of your foundation stock, someone who has dogs from the same family of dogs as yours, someone you see regularly at shows and whose dogs you admire (not necessarily in your same variety or size). All it takes is a little effort from you to grow that connection into an ongoing relationship.

The first contact is up to you, so make it a great one with a phone/video call or face to face conversation – don't hide behind a text or email. Explain that you're reaching out to see if they are willing to be a resource for you as you work toward the goals of your breeding program. If you're not getting a sense from the initial contact that it's not a good fit; bad timing, lack of interest, etc. move on to someone else. The DCA list of approved mentors is a great resource.

If you've had a good initial conversation, and you think they can provide you the guidance you're looking for, get buy-in on a preliminary schedule of follow-ups. How often you speak is up to you and your mentor, but the goal is long-term, continued contact. While phone/video calls and in-person meetings are important, take advantage of texts, emails and social media to have regular, no-pressure interactions with your mentor- think about light things; interesting articles, book recommendations, etc. Be sure to not over do, or you'll come off as pushy. Never discuss important topics like planned breedings, pedigrees or stud dog options this way - save that for personal interactions.

Building Mentor Relationships, continued



How Can You Add Value to the Relationship?

A mentor relationship should be casual, friendly and beneficial to both you and your mentor. It can be easy to fall into a pattern of asking a lot of your mentor without giving anything in return. While your mentor might be happy to provide you with advice regardless of receiving anything in return, it's still important to think of some ways to show your appreciation.

- Be open to feedback – remember you asked for their guidance and support.
- Always value your mentor's time – try to arrive for calls or meetings early or adjust your own schedule to make meeting more convenient for your mentor.
- The best mentor relationships grow through sharing experiences and stories, so along the way you may also teach your mentor.
- Don't forget the simple things - a thank-you note or holiday card can go a long way to show you value your mentor's advice and support.

Just One Mentor?

As your knowledge and experience grow, it's possible that what you need from a mentor can change. This means that who you look to as a mentor can change.

You may still want input from someone in your own coat variety and size with input on individual breedings and knowledge on dogs of the past. But you may also find value in another mentor in another coat (or breed) with a fresh pair of eyes on issues or opportunities you've not considered before.

There's no one size fits all approach, so pursue what works best for you and your goals!

Invest in your mentor relationship so that one day you can pay forward and share your knowledge with others!

Debby Krieg, 2020