

Why You Need a Mentor

“Dammit! I don’t get this guy”, I said as I slammed the door. I wondered out loud to my wife if I’d made a wrong career decision.

I’d changed companies and took a new opportunity to get us closer to home, relocating from Hershey, PA, to Montgomery, Alabama. It was a homecoming of sorts. Carla and I met and married in Birmingham; our kids were born at St. Vincent’s Hospital, and much of our family lived in the area. We were happy to be back.

I moved out of a successful sales and marketing role with Hershey into a new company representative job. My new role required me to represent the company’s interests to the local bottling partner, develop plans, gain strategic alignment and help deliver results. I felt a little over my ski tips – a new role, new market, new industry, and new people. I knew it would take every bit of my mediocre leadership, communication, sales, and marketing skills to do well.

Why? My primary call point, Rick, had a reputation as a driven leader, very demanding, and hard to get along with. He’s a towering man with a very intimidating demeanor – like the kind of guy who could have played professional football. He’d recently been appointed as Market Unit VP and tasked with turning a deficient performing operation around sooner than later. He was under considerable pressure.

I’ll never forget my first presentation to Rick and his team. He asked me to put together a marketing plan for a local university. I thought it would be a piece of cake based on my experience. I invested two weeks pulling together detailed plans, initial creative images and felt good about what I developed.

I presented my plan during his monthly operating meeting in

front of his key leaders. After I finished, I asked Rick, "What do you think?"

Rick paused and asked with frustration, "Is that all you've got?"

There was a long, awkward silence in the room. I felt embarrassed.

My voice cracked, "Yes."

Rick replied sharply, "I'm expecting more. Your plan is very disappointing. Go back to the drawing board and bring back something that will help us win in the market."

I ducked my tail, sat down, and stewed.

This wasn't the first time I'd stumbled with Rick by not delivering on expectations. As I sat simmering, I thought to myself, "I'm never going to gain credibility in Rick's eyes. I'm failing in my new role. I don't know what to do."

Fast forward a few months. I'd been working hard to gain Rick's trust and respect without much traction. Then one day after a market execution tour, we were leaning against a grocery store check-out lane conveyor belt recapping the day.

After summarizing the sub-par execution we observed in the market, I changed the subject and said to Rick, "I know my work hasn't lived up to your expectations. I am working hard to get better and am on a steep learning curve. I'm confident that I have what it takes and can help you turn the business around."

Rick just looked at me.

I continued, "If you'll take me under your wing and teach me everything you know, I will learn and do everything it takes to help you and the team win."

Another long, awkward pause – I think he liked the interludes.

“Preston, I’ve been hard on you to see if you have what it takes—testing you. You know what? I think you do, and I know you can help me. I’ll take you up on your offer.”

From there, things took off. Rick began including me in his market visits and key leadership meetings. We collaboratively developed robust plans, focused the team on the work that mattered, and executed with excellence. The Market Unit gained positive performance momentum and began to receive national recognition. We were privileged to pilot new brands and packages before national launches based on our strong performance. We also re-negotiated key marketing asset contracts in the face of fierce competition. Lastly, we became a model team, importing and exporting talent. We won under Rick’s tremendous leadership.

I don’t necessarily think about our accomplishments when I think about Rick. I think about the friendship we developed over the years. I remember all of the windshield time we had together, driving from town to town, sales center to sales center. When you spend multiple hours every week traveling with someone, you get to know them. Under Rick’s sometimes-rough exterior, I discovered a genuine person that cared about people. During our conversations, Rick and I found that we shared several values, including our faith. I’ll never forget the countless belly laughs we had together, the confidence he placed in me, and how he took me under his wing.

Rick taught me the Coke business, invested in me personally and professionally, and played a massive role in my future success. I’ve benefited tremendously from knowing and being mentored by Rick Kehr.

Rick and I still stay in touch and talk occasionally. Recently, I heard he was retiring, and I called him a few weeks ago to check in. He said a 28-year career with Coke and

seven years in the NFL were enough. "It is time," he said.

That's right. The towering, intimidating man I mentioned earlier played professional football during his first career and won a Super Bowl championship with the Washington Redskins – beating my beloved Denver Broncos nonetheless. Rick is a winner in whatever he does. More importantly, he's a leader.

Rick, thank you for being you, mentoring me, and leading well. You've made a positive difference and left a great legacy.

Leaders – do you have a mentor in your life? Someone that will invest in you and you can trust. Someone who wants you to win and challenge you to reach your potential? If not, I recommend you find one. On the other side of the coin, are you mentoring someone? Are you investing in someone to help them grow? If not, consider mentoring someone. You'll make a positive difference as Rick did with me if you do.

Want to discover how to become a leader others will gladly follow? Visit my website, prestonpoore.com, today!

Cheers,

Preston