



## CIO Careers

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# Advice to Give: Tips on Becoming an Effective CIO Mentor



### Joan Indiana Rigdon

Joan Indiana Rigdon has written about management, information technology and national policy issues since 1990 for publications such as The Wall Street... [full bio](#)

You're an effective CIO who truly understands the business. Does that mean you are also a good mentor? Not necessarily. If you're like many CIOs, you have a lot of good advice to give, but little clue about how to pass it on.

You can start by understanding the difference between coaching and mentoring. Coaching involves helping someone troubleshoot specific career problems common to any executive, such as how to improve a relationship with a key customer. Mentoring goes far beyond that, to include "helping people navigate the political landscape," says Susan Bethanis, chief executive of Mariposa Leadership, an executive coaching firm based in San Francisco, Calif.

When you're setting up a mentorship, you might crib a few strategies from Andrew MacDonald, vice president and CIO of personal lines at The Hartford Financial Services Group, based in Hartford, Conn.

Over the course of more than 20 years in the IT industry, including five at The Hartford, MacDonald has developed what he has found to be a productive system for mentoring others. He currently mentors four executives at his company. Every twelve months, they "graduate," at which time he takes on four more.

Here is his advice:

1. Be choosy. Don't offer your services to just anyone. Seek out promising talent who, in your estimation, truly want to learn. In other words, avoid people who are looking for mentors in name only. MacDonald occasionally hears from just these types of people. "What they're doing is adding to their personal development targets for that particular year. They're just checking the box because their manager told them to do so, which feels infuriating to be honest," he says.

In an initial meeting, MacDonald tries to make sure the mentee is ready



to grow. At the same time, he shares stories from his early career and tries to get a deeper understanding of the other person. "I try to make sure that the personalities feel aligned," he says. If they don't, he doesn't proceed.

2. Be semi-formal. Many mentorships happen only sporadically, with the mentee calling the mentor for advice in a pinch on how to deal with a difficult business relationship. MacDonald calls this 'just-in-time mentoring.' This can be very useful, as MacDonald knows, since he's been mentored this way before. "But it felt very ad-hoc. It doesn't feel like you're building any momentum" towards becoming a better executive, he says.

Instead, MacDonald prefers to maintain a semblance of structure. He meets with his own mentees one-on-one, every four weeks, to discuss their most challenging business problems. In between meetings, he keeps in touch with them via voicemail and email. When possible, he'll even attend a mentee's own meeting to give input on how they performed. (And if they attend one of his meetings, he solicits their input on his performance).

However, that's as formal as it gets. "I don't like getting too structured. Otherwise it feels like a management training course," he says.

3. Do your homework. To get a better sense of what kind of help his charges need, MacDonald conducts an informal 'mini 360s.' He approaches a few people, including their managers and business-side customers, to "get some brief but poignant input on how they are perceived" in the company, he says. Those remarks give him a sense of the mentee's personal brand.

One 360 told MacDonald a mentee was perceived as "really good technically and can deliver anything, but can't explain that to the business. Never put him in front of the CIO," MacDonald says. He took that information back to the mentee and said, "Is that the brand you really want?" That challenge helped frame all of their work together. Bethanis is impressed by MacDonald's approach. Although coaches often do 360s, many mentors don't bother. "He's doing a lot. He's going beyond what most people do," she says.

She adds that it's important to make clear at the outset that all the information gathered and shared in this process is confidential; and that the findings should be presented "in such a way that they can hear it and they can process it."

4. Tap your network. MacDonald has been mentoring for much of his career, including the last five years at The Hartford. He keeps in touch with all of them, and is not afraid to ask them to help each other.

For instance, he can't always arrange time to observe how a mentee handles a particular business meeting. So he might ask a former mentee,



who has worked through a similar problem, to attend on his behalf. That has the added benefit of initiating or strengthening a relationship between those two. "It's very satisfying to connect the dots within your organization," MacDonald says.

He ends up getting members of his network, both within and without The Hartford, to help each other an average of once a week. "That's 52 times a year. That's a lot of good connections that help out not only them, but the company," he says.

5. Know when to move on. MacDonald prefers to mentor people in a structured way for about 12 months at most. After that, "you can get too comfortable with each other," which can lead to less honest feedback or less focus on specific improvements that need to be made, he says.

By sticking to his time limit, MacDonald can take on four more top-talent individuals each year. After several years of that, "it feels like you're leaving a legacy," he notes.

Interestingly, there is one nut that MacDonald has yet to crack: he has no advice on how CIOs can find their own C-level mentors (besides their own bosses). In fact, none of the CIOs I've talked to so far have managed to do this. Do you know of anyone who has? If so, please write me.

**1 Comments so far:**

Posted April 2, 2008 by [Regina Pilkington](#)

I would like to know from Mr. MacDonald if in his structured mentoring does he have a set of predefined topics that he focuses on in the 12 months he mentors someone? Also, to address your last comment on how to find other C-level mentors (besides their own bosses), why not use members of the CIO Leadership Network?