

Finding the Right Mentor to Improve your Career

In any trade or profession, it is a great idea to seek out people that have progressed ahead of you. Their mistakes and successes will be a fantastic guide for you to follow. Why should you learn from the school of hard knocks when you can gain information from another professional's experience? The two significant questions are, how do you seek out that person and how do you decide if he/she will be a great mentor?

The first question to ask yourself is whether you are searching for a skill or for knowledge? When you are looking for a skill, like a great poodle or bichon clip, you scout for someone who is outstanding in what they do. Groom team, legacy groomers, show groomers, and winning competitive groomers are all great resources. Many of these individuals will create videos and hold seminars. Talking about a skill in a seminar versus someone directly critiquing your abilities are two hugely different things. Of course, one on one instruction will cost more than just sitting in a seminar, but the increased level of competency will pay dividend for the life of your career.

If you are seeking out a mentor strictly for knowledge, then the game changes. Just as you would not pick a groomer with little experience solely based on attending one seminar, you should not choose someone to teach you skin therapies without substantial knowledge in the area. Google research does not qualify as substantial knowledge. Your best sources are those that have taken the courses and AND have a practical grasp on their specialty. The more credentials and experience the better. Many self-proclaimed "experts" in their field have done tons of research on the computer, however, they have never actually applied what they have learned. This would be similar to an architect that can draw a beautiful set of plans but has never used a hammer to build a house. This would not be who I would recommend building your house.

So how do you locate these people? First, seek out the leaders teaching the courses or those that have specialized training in the desired area. Next, research their credentials. Keep in mind that memberships in groups, internet research, or being very vocal on social media are not credentials. Look for people who have credentials specifically in the area you are seeking out. Just because someone is a master groomer does not mean they are experts in different aspects of the health of the pet. It means they are masters at grooming. If they are teaching CPR, are they certified? If they are teaching first aid, do they have any certifications and actual experience? If they are teaching chemistry or microbiology, do they have a degree? Learning incorrect information does not enhance you, it hinders your future ability to be successful.

There is another significant question to ask yourself when seeking knowledge mentorship and that is, what types of results has the person providing the instruction produced? If they are teaching skin treatments and only a small percentage get better, do you consider them an authority in that area? If they do not know why the skin is bad to start with, will they be adequately equipped to deal with the issue? It is hard to fix a skin problem in a dog with Cushing's disease if you do not first address the Cushing's disease. If a person is teaching first aid, have they ever applied a bandage in a real situation? There are three parts to being a good guide of knowledge. First is personally learning it, second is being able to apply it with success, and third is being able to explain or teach others.

The area of knowledge is quite different than skill, because there is really no endpoint. Once you have mastered the continental on a poodle you can hone your skills, but there is not a lot of “new” learning that follows. When it comes to knowledge, there is no limit. There are so many things to be continuously learned such as new research, new methods, newly developed products, etc. With that being said, it is most beneficial to learn from people that are in places to help you advance your knowledge. We must search for mentors that have the most current and relevant knowledge. Ask yourself if your chosen candidate is keeping up with the times or are they still teaching information that they learned 20 years ago?

One trap that many people fall into while searching for knowledge is if it is on the internet than it must be true! In veterinary medicine we call it the “Dr. Google Syndrome”. Even though there is some great knowledge to be found, there is also a lot of false information. The difficult part is trying to tell the difference. The same thing applies as to what was said before. Look at the qualifications of the person relaying the info. What are their credentials and what are their results? Talk is cheap, but what you are looking for is results!

I will tell you from a personal level as a veterinarian that your very first job is the determining factor of a veterinarian’s career. We were all taught the same in school, but I have observed many of my colleagues learn bad habits, methods, and practices that followed them through the rest of their careers. The old adage “garbage in, garbage out” definitely applies in the learning process.

So, if you want to be great at what you do, choose your mentors wisely before you learn bad habits and methods. The faster you do it, the sooner you will be able to advance yourself. A well-chosen mentor is a great investment in the success of your career.