

# INTRODUCTION

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*“You don’t need a mentor.”*

I met Rahul Rana in December 2019, and I could immediately sense he was bright and ambitious.

It was also clear he was frustrated with his current trajectory.

High school hadn’t played out the way the then-freshman at Rutgers had hoped. Rahul had been in the top 5 percent of his class at his high school, an international piano performance winner, and the business program president. He was on the executive board of multiple clubs, well-liked by classmates and teachers, and a dozen other things you could easily brag about in a college essay. His grades and test scores were solid, but his shot at the more elite colleges and universities would depend on his extracurriculars, leadership roles, and ambition.

Rahul applied to fourteen schools, each promising him access to their exclusive networks and a path to lifelong success.

And all fourteen rejected him.

Rahul was devastated. Without a better option—he hadn’t even applied to a “safety school”—he scrambled and enrolled at Rutgers, the state school in his home of New Jersey. He planned to take what he could get, work even harder, and transfer to a “better” school.

But his first semester of college didn’t start much better. Rahul had his sights on working in venture capital—a dreamer’s dream job to discover and invest in the next Facebook, SpaceX, or Amazon. But most of his classmates didn’t share his ambition, and he couldn’t

find many Rutgers alumni currently working in venture capital. Plus, venture capital firms made it clear they only hired MBA graduates, traditionally those at the top of their class at Stanford, Harvard, or a handful of other elite schools. Ambition alone wasn't enough; Rahul just wasn't in these circles.

"I keep getting told I need to find a mentor," he shared.

Rahul's friend introduced us because he knew I had been a venture capitalist and investor, so he told Rahul to reach out to me for some advice. I knew something Rahul didn't; he didn't *need* a mentor or my advice. What Rahul *needed* was an opportunity and an approach to get hired by a venture capitalist.

"You don't need a mentor," I replied.

I allowed a pause on the other end of the phone to let that sink in.

"You need a *meeting*," I continued. "Tell me which venture capitalist you'd like to work for in my network."

"Like, anyone?" he replied.

"Anyone. Aim *high*."

We sat through another long pause. "I mean, anyone... it would have to be Josh Wolfe, the founder of Lux Capital. Yeah, it would have to be Josh."

Josh is a whale in the venture capital and start-up world. This guy founded and runs a four-billion-dollar venture capital firm. I'd met Josh once, and we had a terrific call getting to know one another, but why would Josh want to meet Rahul?

"Would you, like, really introduce me to him?" Rahul asked.

"I'll do you one better. Let's figure out a way where I don't even *need* to introduce you," I replied. "We will do something *together* to get you a meeting and hopefully something more."

Less than a year later, Rahul was an associate for Lux Capital, working for Josh at arguably one of the top five best-known venture capital firms. Lux Capital invests in "deep tech" ventures, and Rahul was now hunting for the next Apple, Google, and Amazon, collaborating with some of the world's best investors. *Business Insider* even named Rahul Rana one of the Top 29 Gen Z Venture Capitalists in 2021.

And all it took was *one* meeting—well, a just *bit* more, as you'll see later in the book.

Rahul shared in a podcast interview, “I found the right mentor.” Yes, in case you were wondering, he's referring to me in the interview.

But here's the dirty little secret: Most people would never define *me* as his mentor. We've never met in person; we've only had two short conversations by phone; I didn't make a direct introduction to Josh, the person who hired Rahul, and I can't name a single piece of advice I gave him.

Is *this* mentoring?

You're about to learn the realities of modern mentorship aren't what they always seem.

Rahul got *exactly* what he needed to achieve what most ambitious people seek—his *opportunity*.

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You are reading this book because you have goals. You're ambitious with your work, your passions, and your life. And ambitious people typically have *big* goals, the sort that are challenging, don't follow a linear path, and come with lots of uncertainty. You want to start a company. You want to get hired in a competitive industry. You want to build or launch something. You want to inspire people. These are big life goals.

These big life goals typically require others to help you achieve them.

That's where mentors come in. They can help you achieve your big life goals.

But, in truth, this is not in the way most people imagine a mentor will help you.

When I talk to people about mentors, they usually describe a mentor as a single wise, experienced person in their life who takes them under their wing and guides them with advice and wisdom toward their success. Rahul had assumed that too. Most ambitious people assume this.

You don't need *that* and neither did Rahul.

Modern mentorship is very different. We need mentors who help us solve our biggest challenges, problems, and struggles.

Great mentors will help you in these ways. This book helps you understand why the most successful people today attract, activate, and leverage great mentors differently to solve their ambitious challenges. You'll learn how to leverage a modern approach to mentorship in an unconventional way that helps ambitious people solve challenging obstacles they face. This book will help you if...

- You are in college or graduate school and feel like you aren't on the track you want in your life or career.
- You are a recent graduate or early in your career, and you don't feel like the job you have (or recent jobs) are helping you live up to your potential.
- You have been working for a bit and have decided it's time to do something different, but thinking about pivoting your career is overwhelming and unclear.
- You have an important project, start-up, business, product, or challenge. You need to expand your network and access beyond your current stage, level, or plateau but don't know how.
- Or some combination of these traits.

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If you're ambitious with your career, passions, and life, you'll need mentors to help you realize your potential.

This book itself uses a simple idea.

**Aim Higher, Ask Smaller, and Do It Again.**

I taught Rahul and thousands of others like him the same idea, but this isn't even my idea.

Successful people have known this for years, even if they couldn't quite put their finger on it. The most successful people I've ever met describe their mentor relationships differently.

I interviewed, researched, and studied executives, entrepreneurs, billionaires, Grammy and Emmy winners, best-selling authors, military generals, award-winning chefs, and countless others like them. They described their mentoring experiences in ways that surprised even me. Very few talked about a single person who took them under their wing over long periods or guided them with their advice or wisdom. Their experiences were driven by what I call "opportunity bursts."

Rahul only needed a short six- to twelve-month period—his opportunity burst—to change his entire trajectory. In this period, he approached mentorship through the lens of aiming higher, asking smaller, and repeating it time and time again.

In hundreds of conversations, successful people usually could pinpoint their period of short, intense, surprising experiences transforming their lives and their trajectory. At the center of their opportunity bursts were people we call Super Mentors, individuals who provided them with their opportunity and helped them solve their problems and challenges.

The pattern is *nonobviously* obvious, which I hadn't considered when I began the research. But once I'd really thought about it and even reflected on my own life, the pattern made perfect sense. Today, I can summarize nearly every mentoring story as the mentee had aimed higher, asked smaller, and did this repeatedly throughout their careers and lives.

This book offers a modern approach to mentorship given today's reality in a more dynamic, more connected, and transparent world. The world is different now. Networks rather than hierarchies drive it. Yes, mentors are still important, but modern mentorship has changed how we make it effective. And you'll need to change with it.

This book will divide mentors into two categories by their role for the mentee:

1. **Inspirational** (advice, role model, motivational)
  2. **Problem Solvers** (introductions, shared experiences, connections, direct opportunities)
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Inspirational mentors make us feel good, feel heard, and may even offer us an example of what's possible for us. Maybe they offer a picture of who we could be, perhaps giving us some positive words of encouragement. Or maybe they just listen. Most mentorship falls into the 'Inspirational' category.

Problem Solvers are the mentors most of us seek. They help us with specific challenges, obstacles, hurdles, and roadblocks we encounter. Problems are a normal part of our lives, so recognizing them and working to solve them is a hallmark of success. Most people who haven't had transformative mentor experiences have only had inspirational mentors.

You want mentors who can help you solve your problems.

Whether you are doing something new and unknown—like trying to get interviews for your first job or internship, raising money for your start-up or to write a novel, working to break into a new career, or make in-roads into a dream role or company—or trying to accelerate at your current job in your current industry, you will experience problems that are difficult, challenging, and complicated to solve on your own. You'll need the *right* help.

Mentors can help drive tangible outcomes:

- Guidance to solve a specific challenge.
  - Opportunities to collaborate or work on something together.
  - Connections and access to people.
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Problem Solvers (i.e., Super Mentors) provide these outcomes—beyond just advice and inspiration. They help us solve our greatest challenges. For people who currently have a mentor (just 37 percent), I found that nearly two-thirds of those reported receiving a *direct opportunity* from their mentor. Lasting mentor relationships come from people who actively help us solve a challenge or problem in our lives.

Most ambitious people I meet are surprised to learn they already have individuals in their lives who can solve their problems, becoming their Super Mentor. Exceptional mentors usually aren't the most famous, richest, networked, or inspirational people you know. The right person and the right ask can transform your trajectory.

You just need to figure out how to unlock opportunities.

### **HOW TO USE THE SUPER MENTORS BOOK**

If you're anything like Rahul or other ambitious people, you may have picked up this book thinking you needed to find a mentor. And like I told Rahul, you don't need a mentor. You do need an opportunity. And with a focused effort over a few months, you're going to create many new opportunities from mentors. This book's guidance is different from most mentoring advice. Don't worry about the person (a.k.a. finding the perfect mentor); worry about the process (a.k.a. doing the key activities creating opportunities).

You will learn how to create your opportunity burst. You'll be *aiming higher, asking smaller, and doing it over and over again over a short period*. This philosophy is the foundation of a course I've taught to more than two thousand people, which has yielded thousands of unique, surprising, and amazing opportunities much like Rahul experienced.

It will take a series of small, smart actions performed repeatedly over a few months to reap huge rewards. The impact of these actions will compound over time—an effect that Einstein once called the

Eighth Wonder of the World. You're going to learn a process to create opportunities *through* mentors.

More specifically, you'll learn how to leverage the *PAST* framework, the way most hyper-successful people create Super Mentor relationships. This approach is built on the right people, ask, start, and time and will serve as your system to move *past* normal mentors into Super Mentors.

One person who knows a thing or two about Super Mentors is Adam Saven. Adam is the cofounder and CEO of PeopleGrove, the leading mentorship software used by more than 450 colleges, universities, and institutions worldwide. As a result, Saven has a wealth of knowledge on mentorship and how the most effective relationships form. Adam has been my partner and collaborator in building the Super Mentors framework.

"Many people think finding the right mentor is what matters. Find the right person, and everything happens from there," Adam told me. "But we find people who get jobs or opportunities from mentors engage differently. They reach out more, respond faster, ask questions, and are much more active in the process."

We want you as the reader to experience it firsthand. *You* have to drive value from mentors. Modern mentoring doesn't happen by accident.

"Obviously, mentoring matters. We see this in our work every day," Adam told me. "But we're also seeing how mentoring is wildly different today than five years ago. The traditional one-to-one, long-term relationship the word *mentorship* implies still has value. Still, more and more, learners are discovering that cultivating many relationships provides them with a wider range of guidance and, more importantly, greater access to opportunities."

My research into how the most successful people leveraged mentorship—aim higher, ask smaller, and do it again—is what Adam's team finds with its users and customers.

"The more relationships you build, the more ready you feel to tackle your next step," Adam shared. "Learners in our communities



who had at least five casual mentor relationships were 78 percent more confident in their ability to succeed in the job market. The world looks so different today, and your ability to leverage casual and formal mentors isn't just a nice-to-have. It's a must-have."

I'd recommend reading the book sequentially from start to finish, as the concepts will build on one another. We built the book around the four laws of Super Mentors designed to get you a meeting with the right person and the right ask at the right time. But if you'd prefer to skip around—or come back to key pieces—here's what's ahead:

- Chapters 2 and 3 lay out some of the foundations of modern mentoring, including your role as the mentee and the “skill” of being mentored.
- Part I—Law of the Right Ask
  - Chapter 4, learn how to leverage the ‘seeker’ mindset and look for opportunities rather than advice
  - Chapter 5, defining a collaborative project to involve potential mentors in
  - Chapter 6, how to think smaller in what you ask for to build casual mentors
- Part II—Law of the Right People
  - Chapter 7, identify your ‘aspirational peers’ and expand your targets through their connections
  - Chapter 8, learn how to leverage the “Micro-Request” framework to build a relationship
- Part III—Law of Right Start
  - Chapter 9, understand how to grow and expand relationships through (faster) feedback loops
  - Chapter 10, discover how to embrace the unexpected opportunities and harness those that can transform you
- Part IV—Law of Right Time
  - Chapter 11 through 19 are a series of chapters designed to help you learn more about the right timing for specific mentors and how to best align your needs to the types of mentors who can

be most valuable—whether you are a current student, a seasoned executive, an aspiring entrepreneur, or a changemaker.

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The book is full of “One Meeting Away” mini-summaries—look for the One Meeting Away boxes. We designed these to deconstruct how ambitious people like you were able to earn and leverage a single meeting for transformative results.

If you’d like to say hello, you can find me at [eric@erickoester.com](mailto:eric@erickoester.com) or [@erickoester](https://twitter.com/erickoester) on Twitter or text me at 703.587.4430. You can find additional resources, interviews, and a community of creators at [www.erickoester.com](http://www.erickoester.com).

As long as you find multiple people rather than one person (covered in chapters 7 and 8) and create engagement with them through targeted engagements via positivity, projects, and micro-requests (covered in chapters 4, 5, and 6) that build relationships over time (covered in chapters 9 and 10), you’ll begin to relatively quickly find your way unlocking powerful relationships that can lead to your inflection points.

Let’s get started.

# WHAT MAKES A MENTOR SUPER?

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Few topics create a stark divide between the *haves* and the *have nots* as mentors.

Sit in nearly any conference or college classroom and listen to one of the successful speakers telling their life story about how they “made it.” Many of them will wax poetically about all the amazing mentors who helped them.

Now go out in the audience and talk to everyone else “in the trenches” trying to make it. These are the rest of us struggling in our job hunts, hustling to get promoted, starting a new business, raising capital, looking to make a career switch, moving to a new place, or just trying to do something for the first time. Ask them about mentors, and most roll their eyes at the number of times they hear, “You really should get a mentor.”

“Find a mentor,” we’re told when they should be teaching us how to engage with one.

Christina Qi founded a billion-dollar hedge fund in her dorm room, started a data analytics company, serves on the board at MIT, and is a member of the Forbes 30 under 30 list. She told me the single most common question she gets from younger people is how to find a mentor so others can follow in her footsteps, or even if she would

be their mentor. But here's the funny thing. She doesn't have one. She finally had to write a blog post announcing she didn't have a formal mentor to let others know it was okay if they didn't have one. Plenty of people *helped* her, but no "formal mentor."

And quite honestly, she never *needed* a mentor to succeed.

Most people seem to view a mentor like we view a college degree. It's another box you need to check if you're ambitious.

**Mentor Fallacy:** Mentors give you advice, guidance, and ideas, but it's up to you to put them into action.

**Super Mentor Reality:** Mentors are active in how they help, often providing opportunities and network access to help you solve a specific problem or challenge. Two-thirds of those who have a mentor report receiving a direct opportunity from their mentor.

Entrepreneur and author Rajesh Setty told me if you ask for help, just make sure it's valuable to *you*. And it's even better when it's valuable for you and easy for them.

**LASTING MENTOR RELATIONSHIPS COME FROM PEOPLE  
WHO ACTIVELY HELP US SOLVE A CHALLENGE  
OR PROBLEM IN OUR LIVES.**

Now, I understand if this sounds a little "inspirational" and not "problem-solving" enough. Let's cut to the chase and answer the critical question for this chapter:

*What makes a mentor super?*

**Super Mentors help solve significant problems in your life.**

What are significant problems? You probably already know your most significant problems, especially if you sit down and thought about them. For most of us, our "significant problems" stem from the gap between what we want in our career and life and what we currently have.

This gap often ties to careers—a specific role or opportunity we want at a job or a promotion. It might be how to accelerate our career. For others, we’re making a career or life transition. Sometimes, it is about an important project, start-up, business, product, or challenge. It could also be the new thing we’re hoping to achieve.

The specific problem—how to get hired, funded, connected, or go to the next level—depends entirely on your specific circumstances.

Perhaps no group feels this as acutely as college students. After all, study after study tells us the number one reason someone pursues higher education is to open up opportunities for themselves—specifically career opportunities.

When we’re at these critical life stages, it’s common for us to look to others simply to guide us through uncertainty. Think of how many times you’ve gone into a conversation with the hopes of having the answer just magically appear as if the person on the other end can read your mind.

Here’s the secret. Don’t start with the person; start with the problem.

1. Figure out what help is valuable to you (what specific problem you need to be solved).
2. Figure out who is well-positioned to give you the help (what specific opportunity you need).
3. Figure out how to make it easy for them to help you (what activities are easy for them and valuable for you).

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Start with your problem. Find people who can help you. Make it easy for them to help.

The best mentors are super not because of what they say or what story they might tell but because of their *actions*. We spend so much of our time hunting for a person to be our mentor rather than finding the right person who will actively help solve our problem. Our job is to identify the right problem and then make it easy for them to help.

Super mentors should drive tangible outcomes:

- Guidance to solve a specific challenge.
- Opportunities to collaborate or work on something together.
- Connections and access to people.

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The right person with the right ask can transform our trajectory because they help us solve our greatest challenges.

Mentors are Super because of what they *do* not who they are.

### **AIM HIGHER, ASK SMALLER, AND DO IT AGAIN**

Why do only a third of people have a mentor, despite most people admitting mentors are critically important for our success?

I struggled to answer this big question. Part of the problem comes down to storytelling.

**Men tor Fallacy:** Nearly everyone has a mentor.

**Super Mentor Reality:** Only about a third of people (37 percent) have a mentor.

We love simple, delightful, aspirational stories. I do it too throughout the book as you'll hear the stories from people like Sheryl Sandberg, Bradley Cooper, Warren Buffett, Oprah Winfrey, and many others as well as their mentors. I led off the introduction to the book with a story of how Rahul got hired by Josh Wolfe, one of the most successful venture capitalists on the planet.

But I don't want you to worry about *who* was the mentor. Instead focus on how the mentee was able to get such incredible and transformative opportunities. Who the mentor is doesn't matter. The opportunities the mentor creates for you matter.

Here are the origin stories of the mentoring relationships of some of the world's most successful people:

- Your daughter is my classmate in college. Could we meet? (Mark Zuckerberg)
  - Want to come up for coffee? (Oprah Winfrey)
  - Want to go to the movie premiere together? (Bradley Cooper)
  - Would you be willing to be a speaker for a new student club we're starting? (Sheryl Sandberg)
  - Can I come to dinner after class? (Warren Buffett)
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These moments don't sound very earth-shattering. They all sound pretty mundane, which is precisely the point. It's not *that* they met or even *how* they met. It's how the mentee leveraged the relationship to solve a key problem. They all form the Super Mentor pattern: aim higher, ask smaller, and do it again.

Most of us have never learned how to *leverage* mentors.

You'll find oodles of mentor-matching events, mentor networking, articles on finding a mentor, and inspirational stories of famous mentor-mentee pairs. But very little out there describes how to engage with a mentor to solve your problems.

Quite frankly, too many people evaluate mentors over *time*. They worry about developing this deep, intimate relationship with someone over a long period. They see a mentor as one person they schedule regular check-ins with, who they turn to regularly and frequently for advice and guidance. Those people are supposed to magically drop into their life at school, work, or in their day-to-day life.

This sounds great on paper, but the people *you* want don't operate this way, nor do they have time for this type of relationship.

And, you don't even need it.

You need to know those small actions to get you the meeting or the opportunity to change your life.

**Mentor Fallacy:** Time spent matters in developing a deep relationship with your mentors.

**Super Mentor Reality:** Time and outputs are not the same. Super Mentors can provide 10–100x value in a fraction of the time others may take.

It's *not* about the time spent together. I've researched and studied the mentoring relationships of nearly two hundred of the world's most successful people. I've taught thousands of students these principles. Super mentoring is about the opportunities created together regardless of time.

You create those opportunities with your mentor through small actions done with a bit of enthusiasm.

As Rahul discovered, some people can transform your life with a single meeting. I call them Super Mentors. You can get access to them, get help from them, and create opportunities with them.

I don't want you to worry about who your mentor is, but instead focus on the small actions that most matter to unlock your opportunities from any mentor. You're going to learn how to act, engage, and behave.

I love the quote by Jon Katzenbach: "Start with changing behaviors, not mindsets."

Most of us "in the trenches" won't need a dramatic mindset shift. You already know mentors can be a transformative force for you. You'd love to have a good one. You, maybe, haven't seen value from yours. You want the simple and small actions that matter to make that transformative force for you. You need to change some of your behaviors.

As Katzenbach says, "It is much easier to 'act your way into new thinking' than to 'think your way into new actions.'"

This book is about *acting your way into new thinking* about mentors.

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You met Rahul Rana already; his story is instructive. He did what most of us do. He was asking people to be his mentor. He was attending mentor-matching events. He was reaching out to alumni to pick their brains.

However, after he did, he kept getting inspiration and advice. He was trying *really* hard and feeling bad about himself because it wasn't working. He wasn't getting help to solve his problems of getting a job or an opportunity in venture capital. He was operating with a very traditional view of mentors.

Rahul had what many people have—a linear idea of mentorship. He was looking for *a* mentor, particularly an exceptional one, his Yoda.

“Don't get me wrong,” Adam Saven told me when he first heard Rahul's story. “Mentors in the truest sense of the word are important. But Rahul's story is one we've seen so often at PeopleGrove. College students network with the idea that a perfect mentor is out there for them, and when they don't find that person right away, it can be very deflating.”

When I met Rahul, I encouraged him to ratchet down the pressure.

1. Figure out what he *needed* from his mentors.
2. Create *more* casual, natural mentor relationships.
3. Work to turn some of those relationships into Super Mentor relationships.

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There is not just one perfect person to help you solve your most pressing challenges and problems.

For Rahul, this meant he needed to narrow his scope and broaden his outreach simultaneously. We discussed scoping out a project. He decided to research and write a book about his interest in “moonshots”—individuals working on big, crazy, audacious ideas and companies trying to change the world.

“I never really thought about writing a book,” he admitted. He hadn’t realized that even if he never published the book, it would provide him with a critical tool to engage with the people he wanted to meet.

Rahul didn’t need a mentor; he needed a project.

Projects are tangible, finite, meaningful things providing us a reason to engage with people. They hopefully feel like fun or at least don’t feel like work. Then it’s not just, “Will you be my mentor,” or, “Can I pick your brain.” Your project gives you a *context* or a *tactical reason* for your engagement with someone. It is about matching your interests to the project you are excited about and then making the project more collaborative. It’s a way to signal your interests to others.

Rahul’s project was the first step for him to *narrow his scope around his project*.

From there, Rahul expanded his outreach. He stopped looking for a mentor. Since he wanted to break into venture capital and was interested in venture capitalists who backed some of the biggest, craziest ideas called moonshots, those people became his targets to speak to for his book. Then he began engaging—much smaller and simpler at first—by following them on social media, engaging with their content, and eventually reaching out to see if they had a few minutes to talk with him about his project.

This was his second step: *broadening his outreach*.

Rahul radically increased the number of potential opportunities he could earn.

Many people he’d reach out to wouldn’t reply, many took multiple follow-ups, and a few thought the project was intriguing and loved his ambition and persistence. All of these relationships—me included—became his casual mentors. They never formally agreed to be his mentors, had a conversation about “going steady” as his mentor, or took the time to change their shared LinkedIn statuses.

Rahul began to change his behavior.

He engaged on social media with more people interested in moonshot ideas. He'd post his thoughts about moonshot companies. He had conversations with his new peers and near-peers. He continued to progress on his project, which required collaboration with these casual mentors he was cultivating.

One of these casual mentors would be Josh Wolfe of Lux Capital. Why would Josh want to meet Rahul?

Remember, Rahul was a sophomore at Rutgers. Lux didn't hire sophomores and didn't hire from Rutgers. But Josh made time for a personal call with Rahul, made time to read Rahul's work, and hired Rahul without an interview.

Rahul had behaviors *aligned* with Josh. More specifically, Rahul narrowed his focus and broadened his outreach.

Rahul created a reason for Josh to engage.

At first, Josh was just one more person in Rahul's expanded outreach to talk to about his project. In a cold email, Rahul shared details about his book project, the activities he'd done and the people he'd met, and the context of why it was relevant to Josh and his work.

That cold email was enough for Josh to recognize the potential for the meeting to be valuable. Rahul still had to follow up seven times to get his first fifteen-minute call with Josh. But Rahul wasn't waiting on the meeting. He continued to work on the project.

Then in their first phone conversation, Rahul shared his learning about moonshots and the mindset of moonshot founders. He asked Josh if it matched his experience and findings. Four months later, Rahul shared a single chapter he'd written based on insights from Josh and others.

"No résumé, no interview, no application," Rahul said. "I sent him a chapter of my book, I thanked him for his contribution, and he hired me on the spot for an internship."

Rahul put himself in a position to have a few of his new relationships create transformative opportunities. Rahul had built a Super Mentor.

## One Meeting Away: Rahul Rana

**Right Person:** Josh Wolfe is one of the premier venture capital investors whose firm focuses on deep technology (e.g., biotechnology, nanotechnology, space exploration, and human longevity).

**Right Ask:** “Can I interview you for my book about moonshots—start-up companies who make big bets and have the potential to change humanity?”

**Right Start:** Social media engagement followed by a cold email, multiple follow-ups to schedule a call, and then delivery of a book chapter that includes Josh’s insights.

**Right Time:** Rahul connected with Josh at the height of the pandemic, just before the summer, as traditional interviewing for venture capital associates in MBA programs was still being figured out. Following his book interview, Rahul followed up to ask to work for Josh.

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“Getting a job at Lux wasn’t the end,” he said. “It was the beginning for me. Now I’m working with a team to build a frontier biotech moonshot factory called Arcadia Science that makes my book a reality. I’m building a Deeptech venture capital fund and network at the university level. I’m working with a Hollywood producer to create movies and animated short films around optimistic science fiction.”

All this while finishing his junior year at Rutgers, which he has no plans to transfer from!

The irony is this. Many brilliant, ambitious people got accepted to those fourteen prestigious schools that rejected Rahul and would gladly trade places with him today.

Rahul Rana credits much of this to mastering the skill of leveraging mentors. He aimed higher, made smaller asks of people, and repeated this process repeatedly until it worked. In Rahul’s case, it worked multiple times with multiple people.

“I stopped looking for mentors,” he said, “and I began to get help from many people who became mentors.”

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Exceptional mentors don't give you advice. They give you opportunities.

For Rahul, this just meant helping him with a series of small actions to unlock the opportunities, eventually transforming his trajectory and his life.

Like most people, Rahul focused on *who* would mentor him. Once he changed his approach to focus on how he'd leverage a mentor, the results changed. Rahul learned how to act, engage, and behave.

For me, my experience with Super Mentors all started with a walk.

I had several relationships with people I would call mentors in my teens and twenties. Those relationships were fine and kind people, but none of them would lead to a transformative experience in my life. My relationship with mentoring would change in 2013 when Steve Blank invited me to his ranch just south of San Francisco.

Steve is an eight-time entrepreneur turned educator, teaching at Stanford, Berkeley, Columbia, and New York University. He created the National Science Foundation (NSF) Innovation Corps and his last start-up, E.piphany, which was such a big success that he "retired" in 1999. But Steve made much of his broader impact after his start-up journey. He developed the Lean Startup movement, fundamentally changing how founders build start-ups, how professors teach entrepreneurship, how science is commercialized, and how companies and the government innovate.

In the start-up world, everyone knows Steve. I read his books and took his online courses, but we didn't meet until he joined the UP Global nonprofit board with me. UP Global runs events like Startup Weekend and Startup Week. Admittedly, I was a bit star-struck meeting Steve but tried to play it cool. In one of our board meetings, I mentioned to the group my current start-up was based in San Francisco, and Steve replied, "Oh, you should drive down to the ranch someday and say hi. Any of you in the Bay Area are welcome at the ranch."

We continued to see each other at monthly board meetings, but about six months after my start-up had begun to crumble, I realized I should make time to see Steve at his ranch.

It was a long drive to Steve's home in Pescadero, California, longer than I expected, and I arrived late. Steve, gracious despite my tardiness, met me at the car, left my bag in his house, and said, "Let's go on a walk."

He took me on a well-worn walking path leading from the main home. He periodically stopped to point something out or move something out of the path as we meandered. He shared a few stories about the ranch's history and why he and his wife purchased it.

I had yet to publicly share the struggles of our start-up and my as-yet-unannounced departure from it, so when Steve asked me how things were going with the company, I paused before answering.

"We raised too much money," I confided. "We don't have things figured out, and our investors are getting squeamish. My cofounder told me I needed to go about a month ago, so I'm unsure what's ahead."

"Totally normal," he replied matter-of-factly. "Happened to me. Have you processed what went wrong?"

In truth, I hadn't. I was focused on the shot to my pride, my anger at my business partner, and my overall frustration at the situation. I hadn't even stopped to process why the company was at this point. I was embarrassed, and this was one of the first conversations I'd had about it.

"Not really," I replied.

"Then I've got an idea for you," Steve continued. "You should teach. I've found that the only way to learn is to force yourself to teach others. If you want, maybe we can do something together. I've got this new project that might be good."

In some ways, I'd imagined Steve would suggest another start-up to consider or recommend I go into investing. I'd anticipated and expected these opportunities. But as a Super Mentor, Steve had access

to and awareness of opportunities that I'd never even considered. What I received that day was impactful. He knew what I couldn't see (yet).

"Let's keep talking about it," he said.

I looked up and realized we were back at my car. Steve grabbed my bag he'd stashed in the doorway when I arrived and handed it to me, saying, "This project could be good for you. Let's follow up when you're back."

I wasn't sure what had happened during those thirty minutes, but it kicked off something unexpected. The next day, I followed up and told Steve I thought teaching sounded fun, and I'd be open to whatever he thought.

Over the next six months, I went through a transformative whirlwind. Steve knew what I needed and took it upon himself to volunteer me to help him launch a new course. I went on to teach with Steve in more than a dozen places across the country and expanded the course to more than sixty accelerator and incubator programs around the globe. It was hard work, but it was enjoyable and something I speak about to others nearly ten years later. As I learned later, Steve was a Super Mentor of the highest order. To help find their footing, he worked with other failed founders like me, including Eric Ries (author of *The Lean Startup*) and Derek Andersen (cofounder of Startup Grind & Bevy).

I realized later that Steve had done something very unique with each of us.

#### **One Meeting Away:** Eric Koester

**Right Person:** Steve Blank had experienced start-up successes and failures. He'd been able to learn about me over the prior six months we casually shared on a nonprofit board.

**Right Ask:** What's ahead for me after getting fired from my start-up?

**Right Start:** Asking to visit Steve’s ranch, a walk, an offer to teach together, and six months of collaboration to launch a course together worldwide.

**Right Time:** Steve wanted to launch something new and was looking for someone looking for a project to help do it well, leading to the opportunity to launch programs in thirty countries at more than seventy-five start-up accelerators, incubators, and laboratories.

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I wondered if I could do the same thing Steve did for us for others. I first tried teaching a class at Georgetown. It was fine, but I quickly realized I wasn’t having any lasting or transformative impact on my students—certainly, nothing even close to Steve’s impact on me.

So I asked myself a straightforward question, “What would Steve do?”

Steve was a transformative force in my life, not because of the amount of time or individual support or coaching I received from him. He created opportunities and access for me. We had a project to engage in. Could I create something similar for others? I continued down the rabbit hole and studied other successful people and their mentors.

I realized I had something here, so I decided to take what I’d learned and bring a new course to Georgetown to help my students create Super Mentor relationships. That course has become one of Georgetown’s most popular elective courses, and now I teach versions of it to nearly two thousand people. Just two years after the first time it was offered, the course would be named the most innovative course of the year, and soon I was named the Entrepreneurial Educator of the Year by USASBE.

I was more than a little surprised by the reaction. But maybe it makes sense. We all know that we need help from others to succeed. We don’t necessarily know *how* to get the right help. Some



incredible people are willing to help us, and we just need to make it easier for them.

Steve offered me a playbook that became the core of the course: **Help someone work on a meaningful project that lets them engage with people they admire.** While my project with Steve was a new course, I've learned how to help anyone develop a project, including novels, audio shows, TEDx talks, an album, a YouTube channel, coaching businesses, and nonfiction books. Then, we work on leveraging that project to create potentially transformative relationships with others.

This approach leverages everything I've learned about Super Mentors. You create them by aiming higher, asking smaller, and repeating the process. This process works because you are building a collection of casual mentors, some of whom will ultimately become your Super Mentors.

When I tell people about what I teach at Georgetown, almost everyone says, "Oh, can I take the class?" For years, I've had to answer no to that question, at least to everyone who didn't happen to be one of the ten thousand students at Georgetown. But that is no longer the case. I've begun offering workshops to everyone, and I've written this book, so you don't have to go to Georgetown to learn how to create Super Mentor relationships.

You will have to stop waiting. You'll have to stop asking for advice. You have to have fun with the process. And you're going to have to ask for opportunities and access.

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If you've read this far, now is a good moment to take stock of your problems. Remember, it's not bad to have problems—quite the opposite. Ambitious people have big dreams, and their problem is how to realize them. Achieving big, hard, challenging goals rarely happens by ourselves.

I've used this framing question to help thousands of my students:

**Ten years from now, in a best-case scenario, what would you love to do more of every day?**

Ask yourself that very question. What would you love to do more of? Not tomorrow, but in the future. Dream a bit, and push the envelope. Ten years is quite a while, so you've got quite a bit of time, even if you're nowhere near it.

Take that longer-term goal of what you'd like to do more of and examine where you are today as far as a path there—job, industry, role, start-up, profession, skill, finances, time, etc.

The specificity of your ten-year ambitions isn't important. You don't necessarily want to be in a specific role, industry, or place. Think about activities you'd like to do more of:

- I enjoy coaching and collaborating, so I'd love to be able to do more building and managing of a team.
- I enjoy writing, so I'd love to have the freedom and flexibility to write more books.
- I enjoy traveling, so I'd like to work for a company that lets me work from anywhere or have a travel job.

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That space between the activities you're doing today and where you'd like to be is where Super Mentors come in.

This gap may seem daunting or overwhelming. And it probably is when you start. You want to start by simplifying the gap down to a problem statement. Then you'll identify people who can help you, some you may already know and many you'll meet. Finally, you will make it easy for them to help you. It seems simple when you write it out... because it is. The best part about modern mentorship is there is a repeatable, reliable process anyone can leverage. You just have to leverage it.

## **MENTORS ARE SUPER BECAUSE OF WHAT THEY DO NOT WHO THEY ARE.**

You have or can get access to plenty of incredible people to help you solve your problems and become your Super Mentors. We will teach you the framework behind it: aim higher, ask smaller, and do it again.

Here are a few words of encouragement as you begin your journey.

**First, people are kind.** When I've taught this class in the past, my students were blown away at the kindness of busy people. They genuinely want to help ambitious people.

**Second, even the most unkind people are too busy to be unkind.** Many of us worry about engaging busy, successful people who are asked for things all the time. The good news is that even the most unkind people will just ignore you. In all my years of doing this—where my students have probably sent hundreds of thousands of emails and messages to people they didn't know—I've never had one receive any mean or hurtful replies. The responses are either positive or nothing.

**Third, warm networks exist all around us.** *Everyone* has access to a whole range of networks. The internet and social media allow us to access a host of these communities that can open the doors to opportunities. While leveraging those networks is important, it can be very easy to fall into the complacency trap—as if just being a member of that community will get you where you want to go with little effort on your part. What matters in mentorship is how you act and behave, and the great news is that those are things you can learn.

**Fourth, although building and harnessing Super Mentor relationships takes time, you'll be amazed at how quickly you can begin seeing the benefits of this approach.** Researching people, engaging with them in public and social ways, and working on something creates rapid personal growth and value. What's been most personally fulfilling for me is the level of agency, autonomy, and control it's created for me. I'm not waiting around hoping to be plucked from obscurity; I'm the one doing the plucking. No matter the time it takes

to create, cultivate, and unlock the relationships, you'll find yourself motivated in new ways than before.

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**SUPER MENTORS HELP SOLVE IMPORTANT PROBLEMS  
IN YOUR LIFE. IT'S YOUR JOB TO MAKE IT EASY.**

- What help is valuable to you at this moment? What specific problem you need to be solved with your career, your passion projects, your education, or your life?
- Who is well-positioned to give you the help you? Do you know them already? What specific opportunity do you need—an introduction, a chance to share your work or ideas, a job, or something else?
- How to make it easy for them to help you? What activities would be easy for them, and valuable for you? Force yourself to think very small: What could they do for you in fifteen minutes or less? What guidance, advice, or help could they give that was simple?