Learning from the Best

David Alan Grier and Erin Dian Dumbacher

Entrepreneurs need encouragement but also training and experience.

In this world of remote work and global staffing, how do you find a mentor?

//DAG// It had all the shock of a complete stranger asking me out on a date, but “Would you be my mentor?” was the actual question. It was, perhaps, less problematic than an invitation for a social evening, but it seemed no less intimate. The young woman who posed the query knew nothing of my family, my background, my technical education, or my success in business.

She asked me this question as I sat next to her in a cooperative workplace. The co-workspace was located in an old garage, with the tools and racks replaced by benches and cubicles. A daily fee got you a seat at a long table and a decent Wi-Fi connection. A little more bought you two cappuccinos—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—plus a bagel for lunch.

For the most part, the place was quiet, as people were focused on their business plan, their screenplay, or their code. Occasionally, I saw a pair of neighbors at the table, ear buds in hand, perhaps talking about their work or ideas.

I had come to this co-workspace in an industrial neighborhood of Silicon Valley as a visitor from a prior generation, a person who had learned the lessons that come with vanishing hair and business failure. But here, I immediately had neighbors who wanted to know who I was, what I was doing there, and if I had anything to offer them.

//EDD// Co-workspaces are all the rage in cities that aim to foster the start-up vibe. Far away from Silicon Valley, in Nairobi, Kenya, the producers of Startup Garage Nairobi hope to create a forum for sharing ideas, experiences, and, sometimes, collaborators—a workplace for those who might otherwise be typing in cafes or taking calls from their couches. The Garage recently opened its 120 workspaces to entrepreneurs, many of whom have early-stage companies.

“When you launch a start-up, you’re likely to have a strong uphill mental battle,” wrote operations director Nikolai Barnwell in an e-mail to Computer. “If you’re in an environment where everybody else is also starting their own company, you can draw support and encouragement every day from the people around you.”

Entrepreneurs need encouragement but also training and experience. HumanIPO, the organizational founder of Startup Garage Nairobi, has also created a training program designed to help founders execute their visions. But true education comes with chance and open-mindedness. According to Barnwell, “Putting yourself in a co-working space drastically improves your odds of randomly meeting someone who can help you.”

//DAG// My initial experience with work was in an actual garage. My mentor wasn’t a person but the entire organization. From a group of men, barely older than myself, I learned to arrive on time, cooperate with others, and organize my approach to working on automobiles. I never would’ve asked any of them to be my mentor, lest I be shamelessly mocked in the weekly poker game that was held in the back of the shop. It was in that game that you learned how to hold your hand, husband your winnings, and tell a good story.

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