

## 8 Tips on Engaging an Expert for Free Advice

After walking out of a crowded breakout session at the recent Exponential Conference, a guy handed me a folded-up note. The kind of note you get from your best buddy in middle school, crinkled and hand written. He wanted free advice.

Here is what the note said:

Will, I can't (currently) afford your time, and I know your time is not only valuable but I'm sure very limited. I am not very good at what you are great at. I need to be better for the sake of the kingdom. If you can help me think about my Vision Frame and future dreams, I'd love to connect. No pressure— If you can't right now, please don't. Thanks for what you do.

The purpose of this post is not just to respond to my conference attendee (his name is Scott) but to equip you with **how to get free advice from experts and time with great mentors.**

Why did Scott's note trigger this post? **I stand on the shoulders of many superb leaders who were always willing to take the time for me. But the more I grew in leadership the more inaccessible the best experts became. And yet, I still found ways to get free advice and time with great mentors.**

There are times when I pay for coaching and consulting. I think every effective leader should. However, I have received amazing benefits by **working hard to find excellent teachers and rare mentoring moments.** Depending on your experience level and resource base, the next best step for you is probably some cost-free advice or a significant mentoring engagement.

### **TIP #1: Don't waste your breath stating the obvious; like talking about time and money.**

If you ever want to spend a moment with a great leader or a well-known expert, **don't tell them that you value their time.** You just wasted their time by making the statement. Show them that you value your time, by the first thing that comes out of your mouth. (More on this to come.)

**Don't tell them that you don't have money.** The person you want to learn from is not thinking about the money. **Making the statement, "I can't afford you" is lazy at best and an insult at worst, albeit unintended.** Scott, who wrote the note above, could have spent time with me and learned from me, if he was prepared to learn from me. Money has nothing to do with it.

Keep in mind that most people you might want to learn from didn't become experts by worrying about the money. **They became experts because they are passionate, focused and experienced at what they do.** There is always a path to access if you really want.

### **TIP #2: Know what you want from them before you approach**

You are not ready to learn from an expert if you haven't done a little homework. Do you know what you are looking for? Do you know where you are stuck? **Have you located your issue in the would-be mentor's body of expertise?** Imagine the difference between the next two appeals: "*Thanks for your writing. I have a question about vision...*" Or, "*I really appreciated chapter 14 in your latest book, and I have a question about the napkin-sketch version of our disciple-making strategy.*" You won't get free advice if you don't know what kind of advice you need.

### **TIP #3: Be prepared with precise questions**

This tip is the most important in this list. In fact you should probably list several versions of the same question to hone down exactly the best way to ask it. **An expert by nature is most motivated to help you where nuances are important to performance.** Avoid big, giant questions that are too general and imprecise. These questions expose either: 1) Your lack of pre-work or 2) Your passing interest in the topic that you aren't really going to follow-up. Look at the questions below to prompt how to begin asking a quick question that could deliver big value:

- Would you invest a moment's attention to tell me what you like best about *this*.
- Your second point today had to do with *this*. Here is our current approach on *this*. What do you see as our greatest limitation?
- I have spent hours with a our team and have boiled down our best options to *this and this*. What question would you ask to help our team decide which one is best?
- If we were to make *this* decision, what do you fear we have failed to consider?

### **TIP #4: Use their "love language"**

Make your presence interesting and engaging for the expert by showing that you know something about them. Penn State. Mountain Biking. The names and interests of my wife and kids. Kite Boarding. Favorite travel spots. Fishing for smallmouth using topwater lures on a river. **If these things are salt and peppered into a conversation with me, I am going to lean into the conversation and laugh with you.**

If the person you want to learn from has just spoken at a conference or has written a book, there will be plenty of things you can pick-up and use. Experts are people too. Make the connection!

### **TIP #5: Have next steps ready depending on their response**

The most important free advice may require a little extra time or effort from the teacher. The key question is, how do you get access? It's important to think through what next steps might be involved. For example, maybe you are asking permission for 15-minute phone call or a lunch appointment. Maybe you need them to review something you have created. How do you get a next step of commitment from them? First follow tips 1-4. Then follow tips 6-8. **But as you do think very carefully about the scope of your follow-up request.** Have 2-3 options or different "sized" requests ready based on the feel and vibe of the conversation. If the expert feels engaged make the bigger ask. If they feel distant, ask for the smallest next step possible.

**TIP #6: Make a "next step ask" by appealing to an investment paradigm**

The more inaccessible the expert, the more thoughtful the appeal of the request must be. I like to use an investment paradigm. What does that mean? **It means that I position myself to be the best investment of their time and energy.** I let them know that I want to increase their impact and legacy. I want them to know that they are missing a great opportunity *not* to invest in me. Of course this could easily become arrogant. So don't make it sound prideful. It is about how important they are, not me. It's about how busy they are not me. **I want to simply differentiate why they should spend 15 minutes on the phone with me.**

Show the expert quickly, precisely, and humbly why your request is worth their time, without talking about time. Don't be afraid to list a 2-3 things that you have accomplished.

For example, one time I asked [Carl George](#), if I could spend 3 hours with him over a long meal. I let him know that I lead a team of consultants in a non-profit church consulting group that works with over 300 churches a year. **I told him I want to multiply his learnings for my generation.** And he was glad to give me his time.

**TIP #7: Never leave the initiative with them**

The saddest thing about Scott's note to me, is that he wrote his cell phone down and asked me to call him. He thought he was respecting my time, but he wasn't. **He put a thing on my to do list that I will never get to.** (Remember I am willing to spend time with him.) If he would have stopped me and said, *"What's the best way to ask a brief but intelligent question about church vision when you are not surrounded by people?"* I would have given him my cell number and told him when to text me.

**TIP #8: Model respectful persistence**

The single greatest mentor of my life was [Howard Hendricks](#). **I learned that his love language, like many accomplished experts, is genuine initiative.** Many students would flock to him after his inspiring teaching sessions. The after-crowd was big, but the real follow-up was thin. Why? Prof, as he was called, was not very dynamic and funny one-on-one. People got bored quickly with him in smaller settings, because they didn't know how to learn from him.

**Thousands are interested but very few are consistently persistent.** If at first the expert does not respond, try again. Differentiate yourself with great questions, engaging follow-up, and real initiative.

As you can see from this post, I love to learn. Here is my favorite post on learning: [6 Radical Steps to Learning What you Don't Know](#)

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