

CHAPTER 4

Who Do I Run to? Finding a Mentor and Building Mentor Relationships



Yolanda H. Caraway, Founder and CEO, The Caraway Group

Increasingly, it is becoming less of a surprise to see African Americans in positions of power as business owners or company executives. Despite these achievements, though, many women lament the difficulty in finding and establishing mentor relationships. The ability to establish relationships tends to be hampered due to the executive's increased responsibilities and limited time to perform in those roles. Often, unless you are privy to these circles, there is a lack of knowledge that these women even hold these positions of influence and power. Further, many people have "mentor vision," in that they have a specific vision for what their mentor will look like, how the relationship will develop, and the role the mentor will play. In reality, mentor relationships can take many forms, including formal or informal; career, company, or industry specific; or long standing or short term, to name a few.

Yolanda H. Caraway is Founder and CEO of The Caraway Group, a boutique public relations agency located in Washington DC. Since founding The Caraway Group in 1987, Yolanda and her team have counseled well-known Fortune 500 companies, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and high-profile individuals in every aspect of communications strategy. She is a nationally recognized public relations and public affairs strategist who is known for policy-making, political management, and public relations work in government, and nonprofit and private sectors. She has worked with major US companies such as Microsoft Corporation, Google, AT&T, MGM Mirage, Bristol Myers Squibb, Mitsubishi, and Texaco.

Additionally, for the past three decades, Yolanda has played a major role in shaping the goals and objectives of the national Democratic Party, and has been called upon throughout her career

to coordinate various party efforts. Her agency has counseled government and nonprofit agencies such as the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, the US Department of Commerce, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center for American Progress, and events such as the NATO Fiftieth Anniversary Summit, the NAACP Image Awards, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Foundation Project, and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the March on Washington.

In 2009, Yolanda was appointed to the Council on American Politics, a group of nationally renowned political leaders addressing current affairs and working toward the growth and enrichment of The George Washington University School of Political Management. Yolanda is a member of the Corporate Directors Group and the American College of Corporate Directors, and serves on the board of directors of the Washington Performing Arts Society.

In the pages that follow, she shares how she has benefited from numerous mentor relationships over her many years in business and politics, and how she pays this forward to upcoming public relations professionals.

Rising Star

Yolanda grew up in Rochester, New York. Perhaps unlike most children, she had an early interest in entrepreneurship and politics. She fondly recalls her early entrepreneurial ventures—having a lemonade stand, helping her father who owned a janitorial company, or selling Amway when she was just 12. She had her first taste of politics come when she was just 14 years old. President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated the year before. His brother, Bobby Kennedy, had launched a campaign for the US Senate in New York State. A friend encouraged her to volunteer for the campaign. While other ninth graders were thinking about the “firsts” of high school, Yolanda took the bus across town every day to campaign headquarters to

do whatever needed to be done. She folded letters, stuffed envelopes, made phone calls, and did anything else she was asked to do. Bobby Kennedy won the election, and she received a letter from him thanking her for her service—a letter that still hangs in her office today. That was it for her. “The excitement and exhilaration was beyond anything I had ever experienced in my life. I knew politics was where I wanted to be,” says Yolanda.

Her first big national break came when she was hired to work for Congresswoman Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) (recently retired US Senator). This was after she had spent time working for Xerox Corporation, where she knew she would not make a career.

Seven months later, right after President Jimmy Carter had lost his bid for re-election, Ann Lewis, the congresswoman’s chief of staff who had hired Yolanda, went to work for the Democratic National Committee (DNC) as political director. She asked Yolanda if she would be interested in joining her, and of course she was. “This experience was invaluable because I felt like I was finally on the path to creating the career that I wanted,” she explains.

In her new role, she was the director of education and training for candidates around the country. She learned how to put together training seminars, and manage and promote them, and she learned how to handle VIP clients and guests. It was around this time that Yolanda began to think about possibly owning her own business one day. Always keeping an eye toward this goal, she started meeting influential people who might be vital when she decided to start her own company. Over the years, she also worked on numerous campaigns, including a few presidential campaigns. At the end of each campaign, she started noticing a trend. During each campaign, she worked alongside many white men. She knew that she was just as smart and competent as they (and in many cases, more so), but the big difference was that they had two key advantages: more *experience* and more *access*. They knew how to

use the campaign and the relationships that they had developed to start their own successful businesses, and she felt there was no reason that she could not do the same and start her own firm and be successful.

Political Insider

In 1984, after taking a leave of absence from the DNC to work on the Mondale-Ferraro general election campaign, Yolanda met Reverend Jesse Jackson, who had just made his first presidential run. After the election, she went back to the DNC, when after several months she received a call from Reverend Jackson asking her to come work for him and help put his next campaign in place. She went to work as his chief of staff, and during that time she traveled around the country and, as she says, “met probably every black elected official in office at that time.” Although she was working for Reverend Jackson, she knew she was gaining invaluable contacts that she would use one day. When the campaign was over, she continued to keep in touch with people whom she had met, whether through a quick call, a personal note or, when possible, meeting for lunch or dinner. “Washington, DC is all about connections. When you don’t stay in touch, people forget about you,” she says. By this time, the entrepreneurial urge was getting stronger. While she was not quite ready to fully make the leap, she knew that it was eventually going to happen. Anticipating this time, in 1987 she incorporated her business, the Caraway Group.

While still working her day job, her new company began picking up work on the side through partnering with the late Caroline Jones of Caroline Jones Advertising. Caroline was an African American businesswoman and pioneer in the advertising industry. She started her career with the J. Walter Thompson Company and was the first African American woman elected vice president of a major advertising agency. Caroline died of cancer in 2001.

One of her former colleagues from the DNC was the late Ron Brown who, at the time, was a partner in the law firm of Patton, Boggs and Blow. This became a critical relationship for Yolanda as he was once a rising star on the political scene and he wanted to get back into Democratic politics in a major way. Yolanda suggested that he join the 1988 campaign as convention manager, in charge of Reverend Jackson's convention operation. With Yolanda's help, he went on to become the first African American chairman of a major political party. He appointed her his senior adviser, and she managed the site-selection process for the 1992 national convention. Brown went on to become President Bill Clinton's secretary of commerce, once again becoming the first African American to hold that position. Tragically, he died in a plane crash in 1996. "We genuinely helped each other. I'll always remember that this relationship helped propel me to the national stage," she says.

Time to Make a Move

Yolanda finally felt the time was right to devote her attentions to her company, The Caraway Group. "I had worked for the DNC for nearly 20 years," says Yolanda, "and had key contacts around the country. I certainly didn't think getting work would be a problem, but it was at that time that I learned my most valuable lesson," she adds. Thinking the phone was going to ring off the hook with offers of business, she was more than taken aback when no one called. Incredulous, she could not fathom that after all of her years of dedication to the Democratic Party, no one was thinking about her. She recalls that, early on, she knew that she wanted and frankly "expected" one of her "friends" who now ran the government to be helpful in identifying business opportunities for her firm, but, admittedly, she did not know what to ask for. "Once President Clinton was in the White House, it was an exciting time," she says. "It was the first time that African Americans were really able to come to the

table as contractors and be thought of as real entrepreneurs and not just an afterthought when they needed money or votes. It was also the first time that you saw real diversity in office, so the opportunities and potential became endless.”

It was at that moment that she knew she had to *learn what she wanted and what to ask for*. “This is how the white men in the established business culture had done it,” she says. “They knew, and if they didn’t, someone would call them. We didn’t have those options.”

With conviction, and using her new insights, Yolanda worked to identify opportunities that would be good for her business. She then reached out to the extensive network that she had cultivated throughout the years, first, to tell them that she now had her own firm and, second, to find the appropriate contacts. She then began campaigns to secure the business. This strategy worked, and within months, she started picking up several clients, and her business began to take off. “I wasn’t selected for every project that I went after, but I won enough to keep us busy, and through some of these relationships, we started to pick up corporate clients, says Yolanda.

Her firm started out in event planning, then grew into public relations when she picked up Microsoft as a client. “Although I started out in politics and found a niche in this industry when I went to work for myself, Caroline Jones became a business mentor,” says Yolanda. “Her mentorship was invaluable as she taught me everything about business. She even taught me how to write my first invoices,” Yolanda fondly recalls. She soon picked up other Fortune 500 companies, including MGM Mirage and AT&T. At its peak, her firm earned revenues of \$5 million. Everything was going well until 2008, when the economy crashed. Like everyone else at the time, she was forced to downsize—“Unfortunately, not soon enough,” she says. Her firm did recover and the business is now exactly the right size as she considers new projects and moves into the next phase of her career.

Think Outside the “Ideal” Mentor Box

Yolanda recalls that she had the benefit of working with, and having, mentors of different races, genders, and industries. She says these relationships were ideal in that these individuals were more experienced than she, and her association with them allowed her to glean as much insight as possible. “I did not always seek mentors, but I was fortunate to have working relationships that often turned into mentor relationships. They saw that I listened and was willing to learn from them. This, in turn, made them want to share information with me,” says Yolanda. “Had I not been open to receiving input from someone else, I might have missed this opportunity to learn from knowledgeable and well-respected leaders,” explains Yolanda.

Have Several Mentors

Yolanda recalls several people who were very instrumental in all stages of her career. Her first mentor was Ann Lewis, who became her political mentor. She credits her with giving her one of her first opportunities in national politics. “Although I worked behind the scenes, she taught me how the political game *really* works,” says Yolanda.

Her next mentor, Caroline Jones, became her business mentor and taught her everything about business, from providing practical advice to how to negotiate a deal. They went on to start a business together, CCS Events, which was formed around the 1992 Democratic Convention in New York City.

Another mentor, the late Ron Brown, helped propel her to the national stage. She has been involved in every national convention since 1984 and, most recently, managed the backstage and podium operations for the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Conventions.

Realize Every Relationship Has Potential

Once she decided that she wanted to open a business, Yolanda approached business dealings with an eye toward the future. With every opportunity that came her way, Yolanda completed it with her future business in mind. Business acquaintances became potential business clients. Colleagues became potential partners. “Every situation became a prospect,” says Yolanda. When the timing was right and she decided to focus on her own business, she was able to leverage those relationships to secure contracts and propel her business.

Create a Reputation Worthy of Mentorship

Yolanda earned a reputation as a go-to person to get things done. After nearly 20 years, she had attained leadership roles within the DNC and been able to successfully leverage relationships that always led to her next opportunity, whether within the committee, on national campaigns, or through her own agency. “While I am sure I would have been successful, I’m not sure how long it would have taken my firm to achieve the level of success that it has experienced. Having the mentor relationships that I’ve had, changed the direction of my business in many ways and definitely shortened the learning curve for me,” says Yolanda.

50 Billion Dollar Boss Moves

Attracting and building mentor relationships can be challenging. To attract the right mentors to help you and your business, you should:

- Think outside the “ideal” mentor box;
- Have several mentors;
- Realize every relationship has potential; and
- Create a reputation worthy of mentorship.