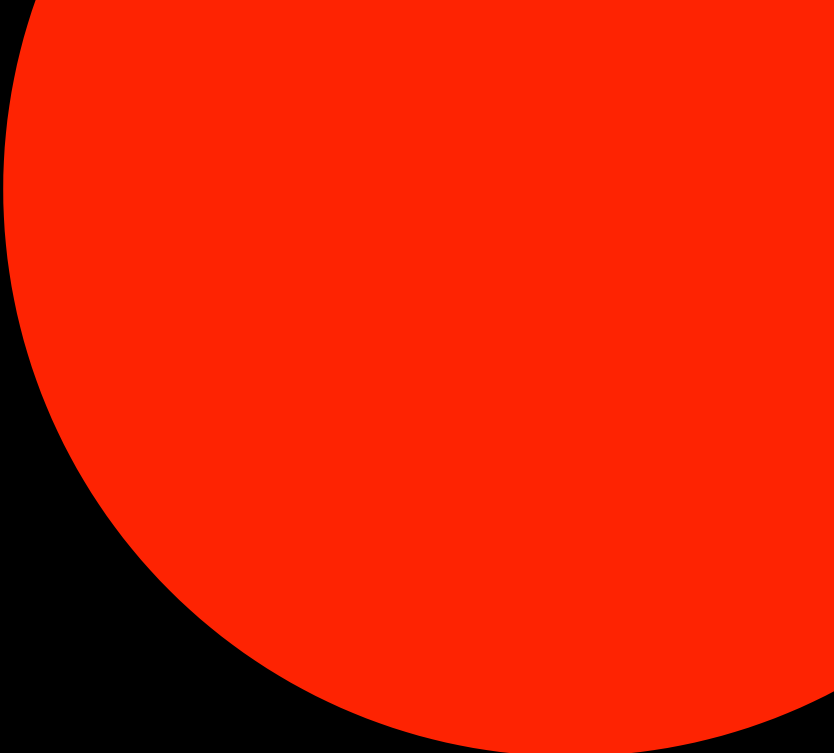


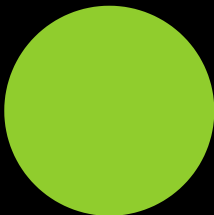
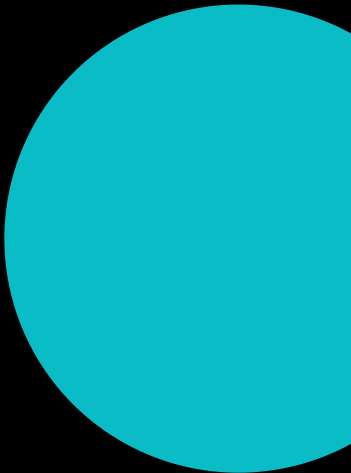
nAItive



The Mentor Manifesto

How nAItive mentors

work



12 principles for working with AI-native founders. Written by the
nAItive Institute, founded by Leonid Boguslavsky and H-FARM.

Mentorship is not a title. It is a way of working. These 12 principles describe it: we use them to select mentors, to set expectations from the first conversation, and to review how each mentorship is going.

nActive mentors are founders, operators, investors and domain experts with first-hand experience of building companies. They help AI-native founders make better decisions, faster: by challenging assumptions, sharing what they have seen work and fail, and opening their networks when it matters.

The principles in short

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|---|--|
| 01 Keep the founder in the driver's seat.
Challenge, question, push back. Then let them decide. It's their company and their call. | 02 Build capability, not dependency.
Share the reasoning, not just the answer. Success is a founder who no longer needs you. |
| 03 Be direct.
Say the hard thing clearly and early. Be demanding, never destructive. | 04 Ask for evidence, not opinions.
Push Fellows to validate assumptions with real customers, real data and small experiments before trusting their gut, or yours. |
| 05 Separate fact, experience and hypothesis.
Say which one you're offering. "I saw this work at my company" is not "this will work for you". | 06 Say "I don't know".
If it's outside your expertise, say so, and point the Fellow to someone who knows. |
| 07 End with a next step.
Every conversation should leave a clearer decision, a concrete action or an experiment to run. | 08 Show up prepared.
Read what the Fellow sent before you meet. Bring specific questions, not generic advice. |
| 09 Be responsive and follow through.
Reply promptly and do what you said you would. If you can't commit, say no. That's fine too. | 10 Open doors.
Make relevant introductions to customers, investors and operators. Your network is part of the mentorship. |
| 11 Keep it confidential. Declare conflicts.
What Fellows share stays with you and the nActive team. Disclose any investment, client or competing interest before you engage. | 12 Earn your place in the pool.
Fellows give feedback after every engagement. Mentors who deliver stay certified; those who don't step out. |

01

Keep the founder in the driver's seat.

Challenge, question, push back. Then let them decide. It's their company and their call.

The founder lives with the consequences of every decision long after the conversation ends. You don't. That asymmetry is the whole point: your job is to make their decision better, not to make it for them.

Strong mentors are often strong operators, and operators are used to deciding. The temptation is to say "if I were you, I'd do X" and move on. It feels helpful. It isn't: a founder who executes your plan without owning it will abandon it at the first obstacle, and will never learn how to make the next call alone.

So push hard on the reasoning. Surface the options they haven't considered, the risks they're underweighting, the evidence they're missing. Disagree openly when you disagree. Then step back. If they choose a path you wouldn't have chosen, help them execute it as well as possible, and agree on what would tell them it isn't working.

In practice

- Frame input as options and trade-offs, not instructions.
- Ask the founder to state their decision and their reasons out loud before you leave.
- Support a choice you disagree with once it's made, and agree on the signal that would change it.

Avoid

- "Just do what I did."
- Making decisions on the founder's behalf with customers, investors or the team.
- Withdrawing your support because they didn't follow your advice.

Questions to ask

- What are the options you're choosing between?
- What would have to be true for the other option to be right?
- What will you decide, and when?

02

Build capability, not dependency.

Share the reasoning, not just the answer. Success is a founder who no longer needs you.

A good answer solves today's problem. A good way of thinking solves the next twenty. AI-native founders move fast and face problems no one has a playbook for yet, so the most valuable thing you can give them is the reasoning they'll use when you're not in the room.

This means narrating how you think: what you look at first, which numbers you trust, how you weigh a reversible decision against an irreversible one, when you'd stop analysing and act. Founders learn as much from how an experienced operator reasons through a trade-off as from the conclusion.

Measure your mentorship by how quickly the founder stops needing you for a given type of problem. If they're coming back with the same question three months later, something went wrong.

In practice

- Explain the framework or heuristic behind your advice, not just the advice.
- Let the founder attempt the analysis first, then review it together.
- Point them to the tools, resources and people they can use without you.

Avoid

- Doing the work for them: writing the deck, the model or the email.
- Becoming the bottleneck for decisions the founder should own.
- Keeping the founder dependent because being needed feels good.

Questions to ask

- How would you approach this if I weren't here?
- What did you learn from the last time you faced something similar?
- What do you need to be able to do this on your own next time?

03

Be direct.

Say the hard thing clearly and early. Be demanding, never destructive.

Founders are surrounded by people with reasons to be polite: friends, early employees, investors protecting their position. A mentor is one of the few people who can tell them the truth without an agenda. If you soften it until it disappears, you've wasted their time.

Directness is about clarity and timing. Say what you see, as plainly as you can, as early as you see it. "I don't think this market is big enough" is useful. Ten minutes of hints that leave the founder guessing are not.

Being demanding is not the same as being harsh. Criticise the plan, never the person. Be specific about what's wrong and why, and stay in the conversation to help fix it. The goal is a founder who leaves challenged and motivated, not crushed.

In practice

- Name the biggest problem you see in the first part of the conversation.
- Back your critique with a reason or an example.
- Pair every hard message with a way forward.

Avoid

- Hiding the real concern behind compliments.
- Sarcasm, humiliation or tearing down the founder personally.
- Raising a fundamental concern only at the end, when there's no time to discuss it.

Questions to ask

- Do you want my honest read, even if it's uncomfortable?
- What's the part of this plan you're least sure about?
- Who else has told you this, and what did you do about it?

04

Ask for evidence, not opinions.

Push Fellows to validate assumptions with real customers, real data and small experiments before trusting their gut, or yours.

Most startups don't fail because the team couldn't build. They fail because they built something based on an assumption no one tested. Your experience is valuable, but it is also a set of assumptions formed in a different market, at a different time, often before AI changed the economics of the problem.

The most useful habit a mentor can reinforce is: "How do you know?" How do you know customers want this? How do you know they'll pay that price? How do you know this channel works? If the answer is "I think so", the next step is to find out, cheaply and quickly.

AI-native founders can run experiments faster than ever: a landing page in an afternoon, a prototype in a day, twenty customer conversations in a week. Help them design the smallest test that would change their mind, and hold them to running it.

In practice

- Ask what evidence supports each key assumption in the plan.
- Help design small, fast experiments with a clear success criterion.
- Review real customer quotes, usage data and numbers together, not just summaries.

Avoid

- Validating an idea because it sounds good to you.
- Replacing the founder's untested opinion with your own untested opinion.
- Accepting "everyone we talked to loved it" without asking how many, who and what they did next.

Questions to ask

- How do you know that?
- What's the riskiest assumption in this plan, and how could you test it this week?
- What result would make you change course?

05

Separate fact, experience and hypothesis.

Say which one you're offering. "I saw this work at my company" is not "this will work for you".

Founders give enormous weight to what a mentor says. That's exactly why you need to be precise about what kind of statement you're making. There's a difference between a fact ("this regulation applies to you"), an experience ("when we did this, it took nine months") and a hypothesis ("I suspect enterprise buyers won't care about this feature").

All three are useful. The problem is when they blur. An experience presented as a rule can send a company in the wrong direction for months. A hypothesis delivered with the confidence of a fact can shut down an idea that deserved testing.

Labelling your input lets the founder weigh it properly and decide what to verify. It also models the intellectual honesty you want them to bring to their own decisions and to their investors.

In practice

- Use explicit framing: "This is a fact...", "In my experience...", "My hunch is..."
- Share the context of your experience: market, stage, year, team size.
- Point out where your experience may not apply to an AI-native company.

Avoid

- Presenting a single anecdote as a universal law.
- Speaking with more certainty than you have.
- Getting defensive when a founder questions your experience.

Questions to ask

- What's different about your situation from the one I'm describing?
- Which part of what I said would you want to verify first?
- Who else could give you a different data point?

06

Say "I don't know".

If it's outside your expertise, say so, and point the Fellow to someone who knows.

No one is an expert in everything, and Fellows don't expect you to be. What they need is to trust that when you speak with confidence, it's earned. Every time you bluff on a topic outside your expertise, you spend that trust.

"I don't know" is one of the most useful things a mentor can say. It saves the founder from acting on a guess, and it opens the next question: who does know? That's where your network and the nActive mentor pool come in.

Fellows reach mentors for specific vertical expertise. Stay in your lane where it matters, be generous with general judgement where it helps, and be explicit about which one you're offering.

In practice

- Say clearly when a question is outside your expertise.
- Suggest another mentor or contact who knows the topic, and ask the nActive team if you're unsure who.
- Offer your general judgement only when it's labelled as such.

Avoid

- Improvising a confident answer to avoid looking uninformed.
- Giving legal, tax or regulatory advice you're not qualified to give.
- Leaving the founder without a next place to look.

Questions to ask

- Is this a question about my domain, or would someone else be better placed?
- Who in your network has solved exactly this before?
- What have you already found out on your own?

07

End with a next step.

Every conversation should leave a clearer decision, a concrete action or an experiment to run.

A great conversation that changes nothing is a nice chat. Founders have very little time, and every hour they spend with a mentor is an hour not spent building or selling. That hour should move something forward.

Before the conversation ends, make sure both of you can say what comes next: a decision that's now clearer, an action with an owner and a date, or an experiment with a defined success criterion. If nothing concrete comes out, ask why, and whether the conversation was the right one to have.

Specific beats general. "Talk to more customers" is advice. "Call these five logistics managers by Friday and ask how they handle returns today" is a next step.

In practice

- Reserve the last minutes of every conversation for next steps.
- Ask the founder to summarise what they'll do, not the other way around.
- Make next steps specific: who, what, by when, and what success looks like.

Avoid

- Vague advice like "think about your positioning".
- Ending conversations when time runs out, mid-topic.
- Long lists of to-dos with no priority.

Questions to ask

- What's the one thing you'll do differently after this conversation?
- By when, and how will you know it worked?
- What do you need from me to get there?

08

Show up prepared.

Read what the Fellow sent before you meet. Bring specific questions, not generic advice.

The fastest way to waste a founder's time is to spend the first twenty minutes having them explain what they already sent you. Preparation is a basic form of respect, and it's what separates a useful mentor from a well-meaning one.

Read the materials. Look at the product. Check the website, the deck, the numbers, the question they asked. Arrive with a point of view and two or three specific questions that only someone who did the homework could ask.

Preparation also means knowing what the founder needs from this particular conversation. If it isn't clear, ask before you meet. A focused thirty minutes beats a wandering hour.

In practice

- Review everything the Fellow shared before the conversation.
- Try the product yourself whenever possible.
- Arrive with specific questions and a clear sense of what the founder wants to get out of the session.

Avoid

- Opening with “so, tell me about your company” after receiving the materials.
- Generic advice that could apply to any startup.
- Your standard talk on what worked at your company.

Questions to ask

- What do you want to walk away with from this conversation?
- What has changed since you sent me this?
- Which part of the material do you want me to focus on?

09

Be responsive and follow through.

Reply promptly and do what you said you would. If you can't commit, say no. That's fine too.

Startups run on short cycles. A reply that takes two weeks often arrives after the decision has been made. Being responsive doesn't mean being always available; it means founders can count on hearing back from you in a reasonable time, even if the answer is "not now".

Follow-through matters even more. If you promised an introduction, a review or a call, do it. Every unkept promise teaches the founder that your words don't carry weight, and makes them hesitate before asking for help again.

It's completely fine to say no. A clear "I can't take this on right now" is far better than a yes that turns into silence. Tell the Fellow and the nActive team, and we'll find someone else.

In practice

- Acknowledge messages quickly, even if a full answer will take longer.
- Write down what you promised at the end of each conversation and do it.
- Tell the nActive team when your availability changes.

Avoid

- Agreeing to help and then going silent.
- Promising introductions you won't make.
- Letting a founder chase you repeatedly for a reply.

Questions to ask

- What's your deadline on this?
- What did I promise you last time, and did I deliver?
- Is there a faster way for me to help, given my availability?

10

Open doors.

Make relevant introductions to customers, investors and operators. Your network is part of the mentorship.

Advice is valuable. The right introduction at the right moment can be worth more than months of advice. A first customer, a design partner, an investor who knows the space, an operator who solved the exact same problem: these change a company's trajectory.

Introductions work when they're relevant and well prepared. Before you connect a founder with someone, make sure the timing is right, the founder is ready and the other person will genuinely be glad you made the connection. Your reputation travels with every introduction you make.

Make introductions when they're appropriate, not by default. Ask the founder for a short forwardable note, use double opt-in, and follow up to see what came of it.

In practice

- Think actively about who in your network could help with the Fellow's current challenge.
- Use double opt-in: check with both sides before connecting them.
- Ask the founder for a short, forwardable summary to send with the introduction.

Avoid

- Introductions that are irrelevant or premature.
- Mass-forwarding the founder to everyone you know.
- Offering introductions you're not willing to make.

Questions to ask

- Who is the one person who could unlock your next step?
- Are you ready for this introduction, or is there something to prepare first?
- What exactly do you want from this conversation with them?

11

Keep it confidential. Declare conflicts.

What Fellows share stays with you and the nActive team. Disclose any investment, client or competing interest before you engage.

Mentoring only works if founders can be completely open: about their numbers, their team problems, their doubts, their fundraising. They will only be that open if they're certain it stays private. Treat everything a Fellow shares as confidential unless they tell you otherwise.

Conflicts of interest are normal for experienced people. You may invest in a competitor, advise a company in the same space, or have a commercial interest in what the founder is building. The conflict itself isn't the problem; hiding it is.

Disclose any potential conflict to the Fellow and the nActive team before you engage, and step back if the conflict is too close. When in doubt, disclose.

In practice

- Keep everything a Fellow shares confidential by default.
- Disclose investments, clients, board seats or competing interests before you engage.
- Ask permission before sharing anything about a Fellow's company, even with people you trust.

Avoid

- Sharing a Fellow's information with other portfolio companies, clients or investors.
- Mentoring a direct competitor of a company you're involved with without disclosure.
- Using what you learn in a mentorship for your own business advantage.

Questions to ask

- Is there anything in what you've shared that I should treat as especially sensitive?
- Is there anyone you'd prefer I didn't discuss this with?
- Before we start: here are my potential conflicts. Are you comfortable continuing?

12

Earn your place in the pool.

Fellows give feedback after every engagement. Mentors who deliver stay certified; those who don't step out.

Being a nActive mentor should be something to be proud of. That only holds if the bar stays high. A pool where some mentors don't show up, don't prepare or don't deliver loses its value for everyone, including the mentors who do.

That's why we review mentorship continuously. After each engagement, Fellows give feedback on how useful it was. The nActive team looks at that feedback, and at how mentors live the principles in this manifesto.

Mentors who consistently deliver stay certified and get more opportunities to work with Fellows. Those who don't will step out of the pool. It's not personal; it's how we keep the promise we make to our founders.

In practice

- Treat every engagement as if it will be reviewed, because it will.
- Ask Fellows directly how useful the conversation was and what would make it better.
- Talk to the nActive team if something isn't working on either side.

Avoid

- Treating the mentor title as a credential rather than a commitment.
- Accepting matches you don't have time for.
- Ignoring feedback from Fellows.

Questions to ask

- Was this conversation useful? What would have made it more useful?
- What should I do differently next time?
- Is there someone in the pool who could help you better on this?

From onboarding to first match.

01 Onboarding

About five minutes: a short bio, your sectors and expertise. Then you review your profile.

02 Team review

The nActive team reads every profile personally and reviews it against this manifesto.

03 Intro call

If your profile is a fit, a short call to get to know you and align on what we expect.

04 Certification

Your profile goes live. Fellows find you by sector, expertise and stage; your contacts stay with us.

05 Matching

Fellows request a match, you express interest, the team coordinates. Feedback keeps you certified.

A few other points

Stay in touch.

We only know as much as you tell us about your interests and availability. Keep the nActive team in the loop, especially when your availability changes.

Know why you mentor.

Mentoring is not a sales channel. Don't use a mentorship to pitch your services, products or fund. If a commercial relationship makes sense later, disclose it to the team first.

Protect what you hear.

Fellows share sensitive information about their ventures. Don't discuss a Fellow's company outside nActive without their permission.

If this is how you work,

join us

