

What Mentors Wish Their Mentees Knew

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The mentor-mentee relationship is a tango between a more senior person and a junior one. Just as in dance, coordination and orchestration between parties is necessary for grace and success. And while we and others have written about what makes the ideal mentor, comparatively less attention has been given to the other partner. This gap is unfortunate because, like mentorship, menteeship requires specific behaviors – without which the mentee’s success may be threatened. In this article,

we outline six habits of ideal mentees and provide anecdotes and views from our combined years of academic experience. While we focus on the relationship in academic medicine, the takeaways apply to most any field.

Clarify what you need. “I need a mentor” is a plea often heard in the hallowed halls of hospitals, especially academic medical centers that serve as the training grounds for future physicians. As academic physicians, we have responded to this overture countless times in our careers. The first thing anyone seeking a mentor must do is determine what kind of support they need.

While many mentees – people aspiring to become physician-scientists, for instance – require formal, long-term guidance, others may just need support with one-time needs. For example, they may need advice on negotiating a job offer, speaking at a national meeting, or finding a job at another hospital. These latter situations require distinct types of mentors, ones we classify in an upcoming JAMA Internal Medicine paper as coaches, sponsors, and connectors. Some mentees with specific, narrower challenges such as preparing for a speaking engagement often benefit from a *coach* – someone who helps improve performance related to a particular issue. “Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance,” says Atul Gawande, the surgeon and writer who enlisted a coach to improve his surgical technique.

Other times, mentees need a *sponsor*: senior physicians (such as chiefs, chairs, or deans) who have garnered substantial social and political capital over their careers. Sponsors use their cachet to help high-potential individuals join prestigious committees, study groups, or honorific societies.

And finally, some mentees need a *connector*, a seasoned guide who can help the mentor and mentee unite, or build a mentorship team. In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell describes connectors as multipliers who help create relationships between people.

Choose wisely. Knowing what you need is the first step; finding the right person is the second. Like selecting a partner for marriage, your choice of a mentor affects 95% of your success and happiness. Begin by identifying highly successful individuals whom you like, respect, and trust. Just as the accomplishments of your mentor matter, so do their personal attributes, such as altruism, work-life balance, and patience. Find a mentor whom you can relate to and who shares your goals and understands your priorities. And remember that someone at the top of their field may not

necessarily be ideal. We tell mentees to find mentors they can see themselves becoming – and make sure they are up to the challenge.

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Underpromise and overdeliver. Remember that mentors are looking for closers: those that finish what they start. So make sure you know the Golden Rules. Ideal mentees share certain qualities: They are enthusiastic, energetic, organized, and focused. They embrace feedback while remaining honest and responsive. They

always behave with integrity and recognize that hard work and sacrifice pays dividends down the road. Ideal mentees thus learn to underpromise (“I’ll have a first draft to you in one week”) and overdeliver (“I know it’s only been three days, but I have a first draft ready to share with you”). And they always make sure their work is high quality. Always.

Mind your mentor’s time. Good mentors are successful for a reason: They manage their time wisely, often doing multiple things at any given time in order to ensure success. As a mentee, you must learn to respect your mentor’s time. For example, give your mentor enough time to review work products (for example, one week for abstracts and at least two to three weeks for grants). Define goals for meetings ahead of time by knowing what you want to discuss and accomplish during your meeting. Importantly, avoid long, winding emails with little in the form of an answerable question. Rather, frame questions so that they can be answered with yes-or-no answers, while reserving longer concerns for face-to-face meetings. Your mentor’s time is a precious commodity, and thinking about how best to use it – both in their physical presence and outside of it – is important for success.

Beware of pitfalls. Just as in the world of management, mentees must learn to manage up – that is, to help their mentor guide them. When mentors go awry, mentees must be ready. “Mentorship malpractice” represents a set of mentor behaviors that – whether intentional or not – will disproportionately affect your success. Recognize the warning signs and know what countermeasures to employ. For example, if your mentor becomes a bottleneck, set firm deadlines and clearly state what will happen when they arrive. Conversely, if your mentor begins to hijack your ideas, more drastic measures might be necessary. Equally, you must be careful to avoid

missteps that might jeopardize your success. For example, do not “ghost” on your mentor, keeping out of sight to avoid dealing with a difficult issue. Similarly, don’t be a “vampire,” draining the life from them by asking many questions or sending excessive communications. Mentee “missteps” are avoidable but require recognition and careful monitoring during training.

Be engaged and energizing. The best mentees are fun to work with. They are energy donors, not energy recipients. They come to work with enthusiasm, excitement, and eagerness to move projects forward. Mentors are more likely to respond positively to a mentee who presents the upside to their efforts rather than the downside. With this in mind, avoid excessive complaining about other people or a particular situation. If problems arise – and they usually do – it is best to frame your problem as a growth opportunity. Present several solutions, and see if your mentor advises one course of action over the others.

Relatedly, maturity is important, especially when receiving feedback about a manuscript, grant proposal, or talk. Avoid being defensive and putting your mentors in the awkward position of having to be responsible for your well-being. We know of mentors who have exited relationships with overly defensive mentees because giving constructive feedback to these individuals became quite time-consuming and emotionally fraught for both parties. Such an outcome disproportionately hurts the mentee. And remember that generosity goes far: Acknowledge and thank those who help you succeed.

Just as in other fields, the relationship between a mentor and mentee in medicine is a two-way street. In addition to producing high-quality results with integrity, excellent mentees know what type of help they need, select the right people to help them, finish tasks ahead of schedule, are mindful of their mentor’s time, are energized and engaging, and credit others liberally. Do you have what it takes?



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