How to Approach Mentorship as a Mentee

Amy Becker and Joel Yager

Early- and middle-career physicians, scientists, and clinicians have multiple demands placed on their time, especially within the context of academic medicine. The learning curve is very steep as one takes the developmental step from trainee to faculty. As new faculty are called upon to prioritize their time and rapidly assimilate to the academic culture, it becomes extremely important to utilize time wisely and draw upon available resources to promote an efficient and successful transition.

The relationship between mentor and mentee may be something already familiar to early-career faculty, as the fortunate may have either formally or more serendipitously been matched with an experienced faculty mentor as a student. However, as some studies show that mentorship occurs for only one-half to one-third of faculty members, this is frequently not the case [1].

The concept of mentor dates back to the time of Homer's Odyssey, where we find the goddess Athena disguised as Mentor. Mentor provides guidance and wisdom to Telemachus, as he sets out to find his father Odysseus following victory in the Trojan War. More contemporary literature and research carries forward a similar view of

mentor within the context of business management and medicine. However, a generally accepted operational definition is lacking. In an effort to standardize the construct of mentorship within academia, an *Ad Hoc* Faculty Mentorship Committee at Johns Hopkins University proposed the following characterization:

> A mentoring relationship is one that may vary along a continuum from informal/short term to formal/long term in which faculty with useful experience, knowledge, skills and wisdom offers advice, information, guidance, support or opportunity to another faculty member or student for that individual's professional development. [2]

Equally as essential as the contribution of the mentor to the relationship are the roles and responsibilities of the mentee. The mentorship relationship is a dynamic relationship, one that is mutually beneficial and inclusive of both personal and professional gains. This relationship has been identified as influential in the decision of trainees and early-career faculty to enter and remain in academic medicine. Its numerous potential benefits include, but are not limited to, increased self-confidence, improved overall career satisfaction, greater productivity, and an improved sense of professional community [3, 4]. As mentorship affects quality of life and professional choices during formative career-building years, mentees must empower themselves with knowledge about how to create and sustain successful mentoring relationships.

A. Becker, MD (✉)
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences,
Children's Hospital Colorado, Anschutz Medical
Campus, Aurora, CO, USA
e-mail: amy.becker@childrenscolorado.org

How to Get Started

Self-Assessment

Starting with the fundamental belief that mentees are ultimately responsible for their own professional growth and development, an honest self-assessment is the first step in determining readiness and goodness of fit with any potential mentor. Borrowing once again from our Greek ancestors, Socrates urges us to "know thyself." The initiation of the mentorship relationship is mediated by the personality style of the mentee. Management research has shown that individuals with an internal locus of control, emotional stability, and high self-monitoring experience greater success [5]. Interpersonal effectiveness and well-developed social skills are additionally important assets, as they promote successful networking and self-promotion. Mentees should consider their own personal styles, identify which traits will lend themselves to successful initiation, and capitalize on their assets. These and other elements that mentees should consider and monitor in the course of preparing for, initiating, and sustaining mentorship relationships are listed in Table 20.1.

As personal qualities are being considered, thinking should additionally be expanded to include consideration of values and priorities, particularly those that are considered a requisite part of any successful relationship. Honesty, trust, and integrity are important traits to consider, as a relationship with a mentor will require a certain amount of self-disclosure and receipt of critical feedback. There is also often a power differential within a mentoring relationship and likely collaboration on scholarly work, which further elevates the need for mutual respect and collegiality.

Moving beyond character and values, it is important for mentees to consider any personal preferences they may have when selecting a mentor. Trainees and early-career faculty may prefer to work with a mentor of the same gender or race, as it may enhance the sense of identification and understanding. It may be additionally important to explore the importance of the location of the mentor. While long-distance mentoring may have the advantage of accessing skills or knowledge

Table 20.1 Mentee checklist

Before contacting potential mentors
1. Personal reflection on character and values
2. Mentor preferences
3. Self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses
(a) Personal
• Skills
– Strengths
– Weaknesses
• Knowledge
– Strengths
– Weaknesses
(b) Professional
• Skills
– Strengths
– Weaknesses
• Knowledge
– Strengths
– Weaknesses
4. Professional and personal development plans and aspirations
(a) 3-month goals
• Clinical
• Teaching
• Research
• Personal/family
(b) 1-year goals
• Clinical
• Teaching
• Research
• Personal/family
(c) 5-year goals
• Clinical
• Teaching
• Research
• Personal/family
5. Identify prospective mentors
(a) Type(s) of mentorship
(b) Local contacts
(c) Regional and national contacts
Initiating contact with potential mentors
(a) Write letter of intent
(b) Update and send curriculum vitae
(c) Schedule meeting
Maintaining and sustaining mentorships
(a) Contact log
(b) Review and update CV
(c) Review specific elements of professional development plan
(d) Review work in progress (grant applications, manuscripts, project proposals, curriculum projects, productivity measures, etc.)

that are not available to mentees at their home institution, Allen et al. found that mentees perceived more successful career mentoring from mentors within same department, as location impacted availability and interaction frequency, which subsequently enriched the relationship [6].

The next step in a comprehensive self-assessment is to inventory skill and knowledge strengths and weaknesses within both personal and professional domains. Starting with the personal domain, mentees should reflect upon such capabilities as stress management and maintenance of the work–life balance. Professionally, mentees should consider all facets of their career development, including clinical, teaching, and research and begin to focus their energies on the pursuit of excellence in their areas of interest. What naturally follows will be drafting a professional development plan, which includes short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals. A professional development plan should outline the plan for growth in the specific areas of interest and will not only allow mentees to begin to visualize the roadmap to the success that they seek but enable mentees to identify the specific expertise they try to find in a mentor and to make selections based on their individual needs.

Mentor Assessment

Once a mentee's self-assessment is completed and clarity is achieved about specific needs, the next step is to identify mentorship that will best meet those requirements. Formal mentoring programs exist at some institutions, and by utilizing processes already in place, mentees will have an easier time gathering information and making initial connections. In the absence of a formal process, mentees should be proactive in outreach to peers and senior faculty. Identifying faculty with similar interests and complementary talents is crucial, but equally important is determining interest and availability for mentoring. Mentees should ascertain whether potential mentors have reputations for successful mentoring, which will reflect their enthusiasm, abilities, and commitment to the process. It is also important for mentees to align themselves with senior faculty who

are accomplished and established within their areas of expertise, as they are most likely to have both theoretical and practical "know-how" and the ability to promote professional networking.

Mentees should appreciate that there are various forms of mentoring, including dyadic, group mentoring, peer mentoring, and mosaic mentoring. Dyadic mentoring describes the more traditional form of mentoring, the one-on-one relationship with a more senior and experienced counterpart. Individual mentors may be called upon for overall guidance and support with life and career planning, but they may also be selected for guidance in areas of specific competency building, such as technical or administrative capacities. Group mentoring may also include the influence and presence of an experienced faculty member; however, in these cases, the experienced individual is providing wisdom and guidance to a group of early-career faculty, often as a way to extend the expertise of a limited resource. Peer mentoring can also take the form of group mentoring, but without the immediate availability of senior influence or input. Peer mentoring can be beneficial by creating an environment of support and problem solving for individuals at the same developmental level. Models for peer mentoring groups have been described, one such group at Duke University, which heralds over 4 years of member retention and measured results such as numerous publications, national presentations, and successful competition for career development awards [7]. Finally, mentees may consider mosaic mentoring, essentially a combination of all forms of mentorship. Seldom does one individual have the ability to meet all of the complex and evolving needs of the mentee, so enlisting the support and guidance of multiple individuals will often yield the best results.

Next Steps

Engagement

Once the prospective mentor or mentors have been identified by the mentee, the next step will be to initiate contact. The initial contact may be in the form of an email or telephone call, to briefly

explain the purpose of the outreach, to establish the availability and potential interest of the mentor, and to schedule a meeting. Depending on circumstances, the mentee should also consider sending a curriculum vitae (CV) and cover letter of intent to any prospective mentor prior to a personal meeting, approaching the relationship much as one would with any potential employer. Providing information in advance will not only allow the mentors to gauge if they can meet the mentee's specific needs but will also allow them to consider whether they have time and interest to invest in the commitment. In some instances, mentees will have to be persistent, since not all requests are going to be met with quick acceptance. Mentees may also discover that while someone may appear in theory to be an ideal match by reputation and credentials, a personal meeting may rapidly uncover incompatibilities in personalities.

At the time of the initial meeting, mentees should be clear about their requests and highlight what they have to offer the relationship in time, energy, and talents. Mentees are well served by following up the initial meeting with a written summary of the discussions and, regardless of outcome, expressing appreciation for the opportunity to have met. If the potential mentor turns out not to be a good match, the mentee should consider asking that person for additional personal recommendations, based on their understanding of the mentee's needs and approach to the mentoring relationship. While they may not be suited to meet the needs the mentee has identified at the outset of initial contact, senior faculty may still serve as resources and be able to make connections within one's professional community.

Maintenance

Once a mentor relationship or mentorship team is established, the mentee should utilize the first few meetings to solidify the agenda for the relationship, for example, determining the frequency of visits, typically every 2–4 weeks, and agreed upon goals. In advance of these meetings, mentees should always do their homework, demonstrating their commitment to the relationship by coming to mentorship meetings well prepared.

Communication will be always be important and may become increasingly nuanced as mentees become better acquainted with their mentors, particularly as challenges begin to arise. Mentees are well served by being mindful of the workplace, setting realistic expectations for oneself and for the mentors, accepting feedback gracefully, and being active listeners who are inviting of and open to constructive critique. The challenge for mentees is to find optimal balance between unconditionally accepting and questioning the voice of experience, being open to growth and change while maintaining one's own personal identity and career goals.

Mentees must also remain vigilant about maintaining professional and personal boundaries, since mentorship relationships are inevitably based on an imbalance of power in the relationship. They need to guard against being exploited by a mentor for personal or professional gain and to be aware of becoming too dependent upon these relationships. Developing an overidealizing view of the mentor may potentially compromise the mentee's ability to develop independent thought and ideas (5). The ideal mentor can altruistically separate his or her own personal agenda from the agenda of the mentee and enhance and support the mentee's ability to see an expanded vision for their future.

Outcomes

Measuring the outcomes—and, hopefully, successes—of any mentoring relationship has both subjective and objective aspects and starts with the assessments of the participating mentee and mentor utilizing the mutually agreed upon goals and professional development plan as benchmarks. Updating and reviewing the mentee's evolving CV and academic products, both in progress and as they are completed, will serve as helpful measures of progress and aid in the

systematic assessment of professional development across all dimensions. More formally structured tools for institutional or mentee oversight have been created that track specific areas of individual and programmatic interest [8, 9]. Business and psychology literature has also informed academic physicians concerned with fostering successful careers. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors such as financial remuneration, promotion, grants, publications, clinical achievement, administrative achievement, and life satisfaction are all included in these considerations. These models may offer helpful suggestions for early-career faculty members attempting to create their own all inclusive visions for success [10].

Termination

Recognizing when a relationship with a mentor has run its course can be challenging. Relationships can electively be terminated prior to meeting objectives, as personality or professional conflicts become insurmountable obstacles to progress. Relationships may additionally end as professional appointments change, making the necessary time commitment unmanageable or location incompatible with frequent meetings. Relationships with mentors also approach termination as goals are met and mentees progress to positions of increased autonomy. As is developmentally appropriate, the mentor role may evolve to that of colleague and/or friend, and the mentee may in turn move into the role of mentor to other faculty members, thereby transmitting the legacy of mentorship to the next generation of aspiring physicians, clinicians, and scientists.

Conclusion

Mentorship relationships, seemingly part of the human condition, have undoubtedly been around since eons of time prior to the eighth century BC—the time of Mentor and Telemachus. The numerous benefits of these relationships result from hard work and commitment to the process.

Early-career faculty are advised to educate themselves as to how to make the most of their mentorship experiences. These dynamic and reciprocal processes should be guided primarily by the mentee's self-determined goals and career vision that evolve and mature through the processes of mentorship.

Words to the Wise
- Since effective mentoring is likely to enrich and positively impact professional development and career accomplishments, up and coming academic faculty members should energetically pursue mentorship early in their careers.
- Although ideal matches may not come immediately or easily, mentees should proactively and persistently pursue mentorship. The good matches ultimately achieved are well worth the effort.
- In order to best maximize the benefits of these relationships, mentees should commit themselves by thorough preparation for meetings with mentors and diligence in following them up by attending to action items and assigned goals.

Ask Your Mentor or Colleagues
- What are your interests and experiences in mentoring early-career faculty members?
- What are your areas of interest and expertise?
- What is your availability for mentorship?
- What are your expectations of your mentee and/or yourself as a mentor in this relationship?

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