How to Approach Mentorship as a Mentee

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Early- and middle-career physicians, scientists, and clinicians face multiple time demands, especially within the context of academic medicine. The developmental steps from trainee to faculty entail very steep learning curves. Called upon to prioritize their time and rapidly assimilate to academic cultures, new faculty are obliged to utilize time wisely and draw upon available resources to promote efficient and successful transitions, and in these transitions mentees can greatly benefit from relationships with mentors.

Relationships between mentors and mentees may be something already familiar to early-career faculty, as the fortunate may have either formally or more serendipitously been matched with experienced faculty mentors as students. 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]

Roles and responsibilities of mentees are equally as essential to these relationships as contributions of mentors. Mentoring relationships are dynamic, mutually beneficial, and inclusive of both personal and professional gains. These relationships have been identified as influential in decisions of trainees and early-career faculty to enter and remain in academic medicine. Their 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.

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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 by the mentee 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." Initiation of the mentorship relationship is mediated by the mentee's personality style. Management research has shown that individuals with self-generation, commitment, motivation, and willingness to "drive the relationship" experience greater success [5, 6]. 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 1.

While considering personal qualities, mentees' thinking should expand to include considerations of values and priorities, particularly those considered requisite for any successful relationship. Honesty, trust, and integrity are crucial, as relationships with mentors will require a certain amount of self-disclosure and receipt of critical feedback. Inevitable power differentials within mentoring relationships and likely collaboration on scholarly work further elevate needs for mutual respect and collegiality.

Beyond character and values, mentees must 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 these similarities may enhance their sense of identification and understanding. The mentor's location might matter. While long-distance mentoring may offer advantages of accessing skills or knowledge that are not available to mentees at their home institu-

Table 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
(b) Personal Knowledge
Strengths
Weaknesses
(c) Professional Skills
Strengths
Weaknesses
(d) Professional 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
(1) Write letter of intent
(2) Update and send curriculum vitae
(3) Schedule meeting
Maintaining and sustaining mentorships
(1) Contact log
(2) Review and update CV
(3) Review specific elements of professional development plan
(4) Review work in progress (grant applications, manuscripts, project proposals, curriculum projects, productivity measures, etc.)

tions, mentees might also experience greater success with local mentors within same department, as distance can impact availability and interaction frequency.

The next step in comprehensive self-assessment is to inventory one's skill and knowledge strengths and weaknesses within both personal and professional domains. Starting with the personal domain, mentees should reflect upon such capabilities as their stress management and maintenance of work–life balance. Professionally, mentees should consider all facets of their career development, including clinical, teaching, and research expectations and capacities, and begin to focus their energies on pursuing 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 plans for growth in specific areas of interest. Not only will such plans allow mentees to begin to visualize road maps to the successes that they seek, but they will also enable mentees to identify the specific expertise they will require of mentors and to make mentor selections accordingly.

Mentor Assessment

After completing self-assessment and achieving clarity about specific needs, the next step is to identify mentors that best meet one's requirements. Formal mentoring programs exist at some institutions; by utilizing processes already in place, mentees will facilitate their information gathering and ability to make initial connections. In the absence of a formal mentoring program, mentees should proactively outreach peers and senior faculty. Identifying faculty with similar interests and complementary talents is crucial, but equally important is determining their interest in and availability for mentoring. Mentees should ascertain potential mentors' 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 salient professional networking.

Mentees should appreciate diverse forms of mentoring, including dyadic, group mentoring, peer mentoring, and mosaic mentoring. Dyadic mentoring describes the more traditional form, 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. In group mentoring experienced individuals provide their wisdom and guidance to groups of early-career faculty, often as a way of extending their limited availability to larger numbers of mentees. Peer mentoring can also occur in groups, but without the immediate availability of senior influence or input. Peer mentoring can be beneficial by creating supportive problem-solving friendly environments for individuals at similar early developmental levels. Models for peer mentoring groups have been described in the literature; one such group at Duke University 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 combining all forms of mentorship. Seldom is one individual mentor capable of meeting all 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 via email or telephone call, to briefly explain the purpose of the outreach, to establish the mentor's availability and potential interest, 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 themselves might not be suited to meet the mentee's stated needs, senior faculty may still serve as resources and might be able to make helpful connections.

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 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 expec-

tations for themselves and for their mentors, accepting feedback gracefully, and being active listeners who invite and are open to constructive critique. The challenge for mentees is to find optimal balance between unconditionally accepting and questioning the voice of experience and 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 or question, at times even challenge, the advice that is being given [8]. 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 and may be administered periodically through mentee survey or convening focus groups [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 be terminated electively prior to meeting objectives, as personality or professional conflicts become insurmountable obstacles to progress. Relationships may also end as professional appointments change, rendering necessary time commitments unmanageable or locations 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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