

# Mastering Menteeship: Steps to Optimize your Mentoring Experience



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## 1 Introduction

Mentorship is critical to a mentee's professional success. Whether acting as a mentor, sponsor, coach or some combination, mentors have a responsibility to provide expert guidance. Mentors often have expertise in content, methods, or processes related to your project(s) or career growth. However, mentorship is a two-way street that requires proactive menteeship. Mentee "best practices" are described below. As a mentee, learn to optimize your mentoring experience.

## 2 Evidence Based Literature

The following best practices can help you optimize your mentoring experience.

### 2.1 *Selecting the Right Mentors*

Selecting the right mentor(s) and members of your mentorship/advising team is crucial for success, but is often more difficult than it should be (Chopra et al., 2019). Benefits of effective mentorship are numerous (Clear, 2020; Sonune & Ahuja,

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2020). So how do you find these ideal “CAPE-able” mentors? Consider the “CAPE” mnemonic coined by Dr. Vineet Arora:(Tips for Hospitalists on Finding, n.d.)

- C:** Capable- What is their track record for mentoring others? What about others in a similar position as you? Do they publish, especially with their mentees? Do they have the necessary expertise you need (content, methods, etc.)?
- A:** Available- Are they committed to working with you and do they have the time to do so? Will they meet with you regularly? Will they provide meaningful feedback? (Just meeting is not enough; you need high yield meetings for impact.)
- P:** Project- Is this project aligned with both your interests and your mentor’s interest? If the interest is one-sided, there is a high chance of failing to complete the project.
- E:** Easy to get along with- Research is a group effort. You all need to collaborate well. Teamwork extends beyond just you and your mentor. The entire mentorship team and your mentor’s team (lab staff, etc.) all need to work collaboratively. Consider conducting a “background check.” Ask others who have worked with them before to give you confidential insight into how that process went. Then consider whether that’s a fit for you.

While searching, remember that mentorship is a team sport. Identify what needs you currently have. Then, try to make sure you have representation from each of the four mentorship archetypes:(Chopra et al., 2018) (1) traditional mentor, to provide one-on-one longitudinal career guidance, (2) coach who can help you with a particular skill (e.g., job talk or negotiation) or content area, (3) sponsor or senior leader who can nominate you and help advance your career, and (4) connector who can introduce you to others to broaden your network. In this process, don’t forget the importance of peer mentors, or those close to you in professional development who can guide you in the nitty-gritty, how-to aspects of your work (e.g., sharing successful IRBs or grants), and provide support and suggestions on how to navigate tricky interpersonal relationships. Having a team can also help you combat “mentorship malpractice” if bad mentor behavior starts affecting your relationship (Chopra, Edelson, 2016).

To help your mentor help you, it’s also critical to be respectful of your mentor’s time, learn to communicate effectively, and be engaged and energized (Chopra, Woods, 2016b). These can often be accomplished by successfully learning to manage or mentor up.

## 2.2 *Mentoring Up to Maximize Mentorship*

Even with a well-seasoned, expert mentor, you will need to take ownership of your projects to optimize your mentorship experience. Many of these factors involve the concept of “managing up.”(Volerman et al., 2015; Zerzan et al., 2009) This means working to facilitate communication, expectations, and task lists with and for your mentorship team. Some specific examples include:

1. *Setting clear expectations for yourself and your mentor(s).* Often the first step is setting up the mentoring relationship. Help your mentor know what you mean by “mentor” for their role, and who else is mentoring/advising you. Are you looking for a coach, a sponsor, a day-to-day project mentor, a career mentor, or several of these? What is needed from your mentor to meet these expectations in terms of meeting time (frequency/length), hours of work outside of meeting, resources, etc. The next step is setting clear expectations about the content of the work. Do you need help with a project, with developing your project/research portfolio, career/promotion, etc.?
2. *Set agendas.* This means literally setting and sending meeting agendas to your mentor ahead of any meeting. Setting meeting agendas allows you to clearly communicate your updates, needs, and asks from your mentor, thereby optimizing these interactions. These agendas can then be used to summarize the meetings that just occurred to serve as minutes and reminders for you and your mentor. Setting agendas also means setting project timelines and communicating these to your mentor. This will help your mentor understand if your goals for your project and career are reasonable or too ambitious.
3. *Identifying personal goals for your projects and your career.* To optimize your mentoring experience, it is important for you and your mentor to know what your research plans and hopes are. For instance, identifying specific projects, each with their own timeline, can not only help identify the time and resources needed to complete the specific project, but can also guide how multiple projects can feasibly fit together to develop a career. It is possible that separately the projects are feasible, but if too many are undertaken, you and/or your mentor may not have the time/resources to attend to all projects simultaneously. On the other hand, having more than one, but not too many, different projects at different stages and with different levels of risk, can maximize productivity. Having a running list helps you and your mentor prioritize when new opportunities become available.
4. *Be accountable.* Your mentor will be best able to support your projects and career if you follow through. Keep your projects on task, move manuscripts along, and avoid needing last minute input for grant or abstract submissions. While mentors are often viewed as being “altruistic,” their careers are enhanced by mentoring, both from the rewards of the experience, and through project dissemination. (Publish early and often!)

These tools and others can help prevent mentee missteps (Vaughn et al., 2017).

### 2.3 *Mentee Missteps*

When starting your career, it is easy to, common, and expected that you will make mistakes. This is part of the learning process and, if learned from, can help you improve. However, some missteps can jeopardize your advancement and your

relationship with your mentor if not headed off early. Two common causes for missteps are lacking confidence and conflict aversion.

**Lacking confidence:** As mentees start in their careers, there is often much they do not know. This can lead mentees to underestimate their abilities. Many mentees, especially women and underrepresented minorities, suffer from imposter syndrome, where they fear being found out as incapable and undeserving despite evidence to the contrary (Clance & Imes, 1978). This can lead mentees to either ask for too much help (and drain their mentor's time and cognitive reserves), or too little. Similarly, it can lead to deflection and defensiveness to feedback. Some skills to help overcome these issues include:

1. *Learn how and when to ask for advice.* Discuss with your mentor when and what you need feedback on. For example, do they need to look at the first draft or your abstract, or just your near-final draft? The answer should change over time as you grow.
2. *Learn to put your “nickel down”.* When presented with a problem or issue you want advice on, make sure you have an idea or proposed solution. This will help prepare you for when problem-solving on your own, and will infuse you with confidence when your mentor agrees. For example, “I have problem X. I was thinking of going with Y or Z, but am leaning toward Z for this reason. What do you think?” If your mentor disagrees, try to understand why so that you can learn for next time.
3. *Find peer mentors.* If you still feel nervous, try talking to peers about issues. This lowers the stakes and allows you to gain input before talking to your mentor.
4. *Realize feedback is a gift.* Take a day or two to let your emotions calm after getting feedback. Then reconsider what the feedback really meant. Was what you wrote actually wrong, or did you just explain it poorly? Try to identify what action you can take to improve in the future. And be thankful! Feedback means you have an invested mentor.
5. *Develop a growth-mindset.* Mentees are often highly successful. Highly successful people frequently have a “fixed-mindset,” where they base their self-worth on static, intrinsic intelligence (Dweck, 2008). This can cause people to doubt their self-worth when mistakes occur. As a mentee, your job is to grow, and your major development comes from turning mistakes into learning opportunities. Work to develop a “growth mindset” by realizing that we often learn the most and become the best version of ourselves when we fail.

**Conflict aversion:** Perhaps harder for some mentees is learning how to have positive conflict. Many scientific fields are hierarchical. Hierarchy does not easily permit mentees to challenge mentors. However, conflict avoidance can lead to mentees over-committing, failing to get credit for accomplishments, or acting dishonestly about mistakes. These issues can be disastrous if not recognized and averted. Try the following:

1. *Be immediately honest when something goes wrong.* Though painful, you need to let your mentor know as soon as something goes wrong, especially if it

involves an ethical or scientific mistake. The sooner the mistake is corrected, the better. Often, your mentor can share their own experiences with mistakes and help you navigate the response to minimize damage. The longer you avoid the truth, the more likely the damage will increase, and you may lose your mentor's trust. Quick honesty puts you both on the same team to finding a solution.

2. *Learn how to give a "positive no."* (Ury, 2007) Taking on a project or role you're not interested in or unable to complete can be a set-up for failure. A positive no involves saying yes to yourself and your continued relationship with the asker, but no to the actual request. If you've already been proactive about your goals and current projects, saying "no" can be easy. Ask your mentor whether and how they think this aligns with the work you're already doing. Perhaps their answer may surprise you. Otherwise, they may realize it isn't something you should take on. If you decide to pursue the project, look at your to-do list together and decide what project needs to be dropped given your finite amount of time. Working through this decision-making together can align expectations, reduce resentment, and prevent overcommitting.

### 3 Case Studies: Hard How-Tos

#### 1. Giving a positive no.

- Example situation: Your mentor has been looking for someone to help lead the development of a new project within your division. He turns to you and lets you know that he's been having difficulty finding someone, and thinks that you would be great. On the one hand, it is not something you're really interested in doing and you are already swamped with your other projects which you have to finish for promotion. On the other hand, your mentor really seems to need the help, and maybe it won't be too much work...
- Approach to resolution:
  - First, think hard about whether this fits into your goals, how much time you have available, and whether you can truly successfully do this project (and enjoy it!).
  - Discuss the idea with your mentor. Ask how it can fit into your career goals, and what the resources will be. Bring up any obvious conflicts: e.g., as you've said before, my major goal this year has to be obtaining career development award funding. How do you see this project as fitting in with that?
  - If you end up deciding together to continue, review current list of roles, responsibilities, and projects and decide what needs to go. (Your time is limited, after all.)
  - If you and your mentor disagree on the importance, this is where gaining input from other mentors on your team and recruiting their help (perhaps in a joint mentorship meeting) can protect you from committing to some-

thing that will truly be harmful for your career. Sometimes, it's easier to have another mentor say "no" for you.

- If you are concerned that saying "no" will now mean you won't be invited for future opportunities, be sure you address your goals with your mentor and make it clear what you would be able to say "yes" to in the future. This discussion should be ongoing.

## 2. Dealing with a "bottleneck":(Chopra, Edelson, 2016; Chopra, Woods, 2016)

- Example situation: You and your mentor have worked together successfully for over a year. She was just promoted to a new position which requires much more time. Since then, it's been difficult to find time to meet one-on-one, and she has rescheduled multiple meetings at the last minute. You just missed the deadline for an important project submission because she didn't provide feedback or sign off on the project on time.
- Approach to resolution:
  - First, identify any errors in communication that may have occurred on your end. Did you warn your mentor about the project? Did you provide a deadline and ample time to review? If not, do so next time. When giving deadlines, make these hard and firm, with consequences. "Thanks again for your help. Here is a near-final draft. I need your final feedback by XX, because it's due the week after. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume your approval and submit." Let your mentor know that this will be your solution to preventing future mistakes.
  - Identify any new issues that may be occurring with your mentor. The new position may mean that their availability has changed. Does this mean you need a new mentor? Or, perhaps you have progressed in your career and actually need less oversight. Discuss this openly and honestly with your mentor. "I notice it's been harder meeting with you since your new position. I was wondering if we could talk about some solutions to make sure I can still meet timelines."
  - If this is a repeated pattern, it may be time to start leaning more heavily on other mentors on your team, or seek out new mentors.
  - If you remain in a position that requires you to work with your mentor for projects that require meeting deadlines, consider building in additional time by moving up the deadline (i.e., creating "false deadlines"). You could tell them that though the official deadline is X, you need to turn it in early due to being unavailable on the date of the deadline. You, therefore, need their portion back earlier.
  - Finally, if you are down to the due date, one last minute tool is the "thank you" reminder. You can send/resend the item you need completed with a "thank you for agreeing to complete X by today. As a reminder, I need this back by/turned in by Xpm today."

## 3. Dealing with advice you don't agree with:

- **Example Situation:** You are preparing for a small one-year grant proposal and are working with your mentor on the specific aims and study design. The funding is limited to \$10,000. Your mentor is suggesting you propose a randomized study (RCT) to increase the rigor of the study design. Though you agree that would increase the overall study design rigor, you think that the intervention requires preliminary data prior to conducting a large RCT. Furthermore, you are concerned that the time frame (1 year) is too short for conducting an RCT, and that \$10,000 funding is insufficient to conduct the RCT.
- **Approach to resolution:**
  - First, ask clarifying questions: “It seems like this award provides only a small amount of time and money. How do you suggest we overcome these barriers to propose a feasible RCT study?” and/or “Since we do not have preliminary efficacy data for the intervention, would it be concerning to reviewers that an RCT would be too advanced for the state of the project?”
  - Another critical step is to prepare data to support your concerns. Do you have preliminary data on how long it would take to recruit subjects, or a sample size/power calculation that would demonstrate infeasibility? Is there information from the IRB that just obtaining approval alone would take up too much of the one-year timeline? Do other advisors/mentors that you work with share your concerns? All of this data could be helpful in discussing your concerns with your mentor.
  - After clarifying with your mentor and gathering more data, now consider if there is a way to agree to the RCT study design. Could you suggest the study as a pilot RCT? Is your mentor able to support the study with additional resources (e.g., research assistant time/money to hire staff)? Are you able to submit the IRB ahead of receiving the grant so that you can start enrolling immediately upon funding?
  - If you remain concerned after asking your clarifying questions and obtaining supporting data, try suggesting an alternative design, such as a quasi-experimental (pre/post) study. Provide to your mentor clear, concise, written rationale for this alternative approach, and determine if your mentor can agree to it. One way to gain their support is to use other members of your mentorship team (e.g., a statistician) to help advocate and support your decision based on their expertise. (Make sure to garner their support before a team meeting if using this approach.)

## 4 Reflection

*Learning to be an effective mentee is a skill that must be developed over time through practice, conscious behavior, and growing from mistakes. Learn to be okay with asking for help. But, in the end, remember that no one will care about your*

*career as much as you do. Therefore, it is your responsibility to best position yourself and your mentors to help make your career a success. Menteeship is a journey, one that will slowly prepare you for the next stage: becoming a mentor yourself!*

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