

BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE MENTEE: THE FOUR GOLDEN RULES

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Although much has been written about mentoring, the question of how to be a good mentee is, by comparison, neglected.¹ This is an unfortunate asymmetry, since effective mentorship cannot exist without menteeship.² Given the importance of the topic and paucity of guidance, we sought to identify "golden rules" that outline best practice for mentees. We did so in three ways. First, we reflected on our own experiences as both mentees and mentors. Next, we contacted 11 flourishing MD or PhD mentors from different institutions in the U.S. and asked for three suggestions on how mentees might get the most from them. Finally, we synthesized the reflections and suggestions to identify four recommendations.

1. Select the Right Mentor(s)

Making the right selection of mentor is crucial. Because it is rare to find a single individual who can offer everything a mentee needs, a mentorship team composed of content, clinical or strategic mentors is a useful model. Indeed, team science has become vital for academic success, and reaching out to enhance your perspective across disciplines is a useful strategy. Finding mentors for this role, however, is not a matter of applying a simple calculus. Rather, it is a process of judgment and learning. A key theme echoed by multiple mentors is to ensure congruence between your goals and the skills and expertise that someone you admire can share with you. Sometimes, you'll be seeking a role model – someone who is the kind of person you'd like to be. You may also need someone with content expertise, or someone who has a wide network of contacts

and influence in a field in order to advance your work.³ Remember that someone who is at the top of their field may not necessarily be a good mentor. The personal attributes of the mentor (e.g., patience), and their values (e.g., altruism), are fundamental to a good mentor-mentee relationship. You should like, respect and trust your mentor, and you should know that they have your best interests at heart. At all costs, avoid being exposed to "mentorship malpractice," where mentors take unfair advantage of mentees and could harm their career.⁴ Identifying such problematic mentors is not easy, but speaking to current or prior mentees can be informative. Note that responsibilities lie on both sides: you should also avoid exploitative mentee behaviors. For example, treating your mentor as a patron whose main purpose is to open doors, a proofreader for your work, or an unpaid psychotherapist is unwise.

2. Be Respectful of Your Mentor's Time and Manage it Wisely

Your mentor's time is precious. Anyone who is qualified to be a mentor is likely to have multiple other mentees and commitments. The mentee who respects a mentor's time and finds ways of using it productively is best-placed to benefit from mentorship. This means you must be proactive in scheduling appointments with your mentor; ideally, have a regular slot rather than having to consult secretaries, calendars or diaries each time. Preparation is the key to using the time with your mentor effectively. Plan for meetings by setting out agendas and prioritizing discussion points (e.g., clinical, research, administrative or personal updates). Include a timeline for how much time to allocate to each

item so that you and your mentor both focus on what is most important. As well as identifying issues, try to propose possible solutions to help your mentor decide which answer may be best – a tactic known in the business world as "managing up."⁵ You should also help your mentor prepare for your meetings by making requests for actionable things they can do to help you in advance (e.g., "please review this scientific abstract so we can discuss at our meeting").

3. Communicate Efficiently and Effectively with Your Mentor

Unanimously, every mentor we contacted felt that effective communication is critical for a successful mentee-mentor relationship. Importantly, this requires substantial effort and preparation on the part of the mentee. Mentors can only be of assistance if they know of your goals and activities, obstacles and how they may help you overcome such barriers. In our opinion, your relationship with your mentor should begin with honest conversations regarding your goals and aspirations. It may be useful for this to take the form of a written plan of concrete short- and long-term goals, which will help to surface whether a shared vision of success exists. Clarify roles and expectations on both sides, so that later conflict, tension and disappointment are minimized.

During the course of menteeship, meetings (either in person or by phone) should be where much of the action of mentorship takes place. You should establish a regular cadence of communication that includes goals and progress towards them, including, for example: (a) discussion of new projects before committing to them; (b) updates on all journal and grant correspondence (both

good and bad news); and, (c) a summary of status on current projects, including progress or problems. During meetings, pay attention to your "TLR" (talking-to-listening ratio): in most meetings, it should be less than 1 - that is, you talk less than you listen.

Outside of meetings, be mindful about the volume of correspondence you send your mentor and how you structure it. Multi-paragraph emails with vague questions buried in the text are not recommended; rather, focused messages with a brief background that can be answered with a "Yes" or "No" are ideal. It is helpful to assume that your mentor will be answering your queries while or between doing other things and may be using a mobile device to respond.

Most mentors need adequate notice in order to be able to assist you effectively. Plan to give your mentor enough notice for tasks and check that your mentor is able to respond to your request. If you want mentors to review an abstract, a manuscript or a grant application, check in first on how long they will need to turn it around: panicked emails begging for a 24-hour response are unlikely to go down well.

4. Be Engaged, Energizing and Collaborative

Like everyone else, mentors like people who are fun to work with, energetic and wholly committed. Emotionally draining behaviors – complaining, pessimism, snarking about others – will not endear you to your mentor. Mentees need to show that they are mature and genuinely open to learning, without making their mentors assume responsibility for their emotional well-being. Those

who express negative emotions (e.g., crying, anger) or defensive comebacks in response to advice or feedback should be aware that mentors may respond by making their guidance far less useful or worse, consider exiting the relationship. Simply put, plan on being an energy donor, not an energy recipient in your mentoring relationship: help to drive things forward, be pro-active, and accept all comments, even if they appear harsh, as important learning opportunities.

Remember that you are early in your career and establishing a reputation. Given that people intuitively gravitate towards an implicit point of reference,⁶ it is important that you acquire the standing of a "closer:" one who follows through on tasks in a timely fashion. If you agree to do something, understand this is a firm commitment and make sure you deliver on time and to a high standard. Finally, be generous and honest in giving others credit. By being engaged with your mentor, your colleagues, and the wider scientific community, you will quickly become invaluable not only to your mentor, but also to your institution.

Conclusion

Effective menteeship is a learned skill that requires practice, patience, trial and error. A highly effective mentee selects the right mentors, communicates clearly and efficiently, is engaged, prepared, and energizing, finishes tasks ahead of schedule, and plays well with others. Academic medicine needs successful mentees. We hope these golden rules will help you succeed.

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