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[Home](#) > Perspective: Top 10 Tips to Maximize Your Mentoring

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Mentoring has transitioned from being a nice thing to have to being essential for people on the academic career path, especially in a landscape in which team science dominates and multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary approaches have become the norm, as they have in translational science. In a career with basic, clinical, and even entrepreneurial components, a single mentor is rarely sufficient: Building a team of mentors is a good investment in yourself and your career.

So how can you maximize the benefits of your personal and professional relationships with one or more mentors? With thanks--and apologies--to David Letterman, below is my top-10 list of tips for a mentoring "tune-up."

10. Know your goals.

As a mentee, you need to be in the driver's seat of your mentoring relationships--not in the passenger seat while your mentor makes all the important choices about your career. To have that control, you need to do a personal inventory and know your career goals. You need to be able to articulate where you would like to go over the next period of your career and beyond and share what passions you have for a particular research field. Once you've articulated your goals clearly, your mentor will be better able to advise and guide you on possible steps and opportunities.

By knowing your goals, you will be in control of the path that you choose to take--and are more likely to be satisfied with your career decisions.

9. Choose the best mentor(s) to meet your goals.

The world of clinical and translational research requires the support of individuals with varying expertise in diverse scientific and professional languages. You will probably need not just one but several mentors to be successful in achieving your research and career goals. For example, if you are an accomplished physician who specializes in infectious diseases but now want to move into understanding the epidemiology and behavioral aspects of infectious diseases such as swine flu, you will need training, guidance, and support in a wide range of new disciplines. You may even decide you need to learn the language of computational modeling to better understand the spread of an outbreak of the H1N1 virus--and you'll need a mentor who can teach and guide you on that path. It is up to you to find the best individuals to serve as mentors who will best meet your needs.

How do you know who to ask to serve as your mentor(s)? Start with a clear understanding of your goals for a given mentoring relationship, such as gaining more experience working with patients or learning a particular technique. Once you know your goals, look around for experienced individuals who can help you meet some of those objectives, who are good listeners, and who are generous with their time.

A good mentor will likely welcome the opportunity to assist you in achieving your personal vision and professional goals. The opportunity to mentor you can be a great source of personal and professional satisfaction for your mentor.

8. Begin mentoring relationships by discussing mutual goals and expectations.

Perhaps you and your mentor have collaborated together before--or perhaps not. Either way, it's important to understand the framework and assumptions that each of you brings to the "mentoring table." As you "set the table"--that is, as you identify the tools and resources you will need to move forward--be sure to encourage a discussion of each other's goals for the relationship. You and your mentor(s) should have a frank discussion of expectations: Start with a discussion of how frequently you will meet in person and communicate via phone or e-mail and set up a means of contact in case of an urgent issue. Be sure to keep this discussion two-way, both mentee and mentor listening attentively and seeking to understand each other's unique perspective.

Addressing these issues at the beginning of a mentoring relationship helps avoid difficulties that can arise later on, when one party thinks that the other party isn't living up to his or her end of the bargain.

7. Practice the highest standards of professionalism.

Although this sounds simple, at the core of mentoring is a commitment of trust and mutual respect between the mentee and the mentor. It is essential that the mentee and the mentor mutually agree that their discussions will be kept confidential--and this commitment to a safe environment will enable a mentee to try out preliminary ideas and directions that he or she may want to explore before sharing in a wider venue. Take care to respect the boundaries of this relationship by being a true professional

colleague.

6. Learn to accept and give feedback.

The good news in a mentoring relationship is that you will receive feedback and insight from a knowledgeable and caring colleague. Many times this feedback will confirm that you are on the right track and/or be congratulatory when you have achieved a successful milestone to celebrate together. But sometimes the feedback will be less than flattering. You need to be receptive to both kinds, positive and negative, and learn to accept feedback that's intended to improve your performance, your work, or your path.

The key is to learn to listen carefully to this constructive feedback, make adjustments, then seek more feedback so that you can continue to improve yourself and your lab. Also, pay attention to how your mentors offer constructive criticism and notice how you react to it. Good feedback is an art form that takes practice to deliver and be heard. It won't be long before you need this skill.

5. Recognize that your path is your responsibility.

You've set out your goals, found the ideal mentor, launched a relationship, and even learned how to take full advantage of feedback from your mentor. But remember that you--the mentee--own the mentoring relationship. You need to bring your energy, passion, vision, and enthusiasm for the complex and challenging tasks we encounter in scientific research, especially the groundbreaking, novel approaches encountered in accelerating the translation from discovery to improved clinical practice. Remember that you direct your research program--and the best mentors are there to challenge you by asking great questions.

4. Practice good communication.

Learning to communicate effectively is a lifelong challenge, particularly for those who have chosen the translation of ideas into tangible experiments and actions that have an impact as a career path. Mentoring relationships thrive on good communication--remember that your mentor cannot read your mind!

Take time to keep your mentor up to date on how things are going (or not going), provide feedback on how well a strategy or approach you tried worked (or failed), and try not to overinterpret a comment from your mentor--who is probably just as busy as you are. Stick to the facts and make sure you keep in touch!

3. Consider a periodic mentor checkup.

Mentoring relationships can benefit from a regular evaluation. As a mentee, you should evaluate whether this relationship is still

helping you. If you look forward to meeting with your mentor(s) and can't wait to share your latest results, all is going well. But even when all is going well, you might need to make a change in your mentoring team to meet your changing needs--particularly if your work crosses discipline boundaries, the hallmark of the clinical and translational science fields. The ability to judge when you need a new mentor is evidence of your growing maturity as an investigator.

2. Avoid burning bridges if it is time to move on.

Move on with care if your mentoring checkup reveals that you need a different set of mentors to meet your and your research project's needs. Assigning blame or fault to your mentor(s) is rarely a good professional strategy.

If a mentoring relationship has gone sour, perhaps because of a lack of trust, a lack of follow-up or commitment, or poor communication, don't become the victim of a "tor-mentor." Consider focusing your energy and efforts by carefully reviewing your goals, finding the best mentor(s) to meet those goals, and being clear on goals and expectations with your new mentor(s). Avoid the blame game and be the professional who places trust, mutual respect, integrity, and confidentiality as the highest standard for your mentoring relationships.

1. Enjoy the ride of mentoring relationship with a trusted colleague.

Over time, you will change from being a mentee to being a mentor yourself. The scientists and clinicians who once served as your mentors will become your trusted and valued colleagues--individuals, much like yourself, who have common passions and interests and a dedication to advancing the field of knowledge in basic, clinical, and/or translational research.

Treasure these colleagues. They understand the challenges and surprises that come with research careers. Be sure to find time to laugh together and learn from your mentor's wisdom, strength, and commitment to creating the future--your future!

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