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Mentoring up: Twelve tips for successfully employing a mentee-driven approach to mentoring relationships

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ABSTRACT

Effective mentorship is critical for achieving professional success, influencing outcomes such as career selection and advancement, self-confidence and performance, and sense of community and fulfillment. Despite the established importance of mentorship, however, mentoring relationships can be challenging to develop and sustain. 'Mentoring up' is a concept adapted from the business concept of 'managing up' that encourages mentees to actively drive their mentoring relationships to ensure desired results. In this article, we hope to empower mentees with twelve strategies and practical steps to cultivate and maintain quality mentoring relationships, and successfully drive their mentoring relationships in a direction that serves their needs and achieves desired outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Mentors; mentee; mentorship; academic medicine; career development; professional development; culture

Introduction

Both inside and outside of academia, mentorship has been recognized as a critical process for achieving personal and professional success. In medicine, individuals with effective mentorship are more likely to pursue academic careers and research, be awarded grant funding, and receive promotions (Pololi et al. 2002; Steiner et al. 2002; Pololi and Knight 2005; Ramanan et al. 2006; Sambunjak et al. 2006, 2010; Thorn and Raj 2012). Effective mentoring relationships are also linked to increased career satisfaction, self-confidence, perceived self-efficacy, and sense of community (Sambunjak et al. 2010). On the other hand, lack of mentorship is associated with an inability to complete scholarly projects or advance in academic rank (Sambunjak et al. 2010).

Despite the established importance of mentorship, however, mentoring relationships can be challenging to develop and sustain. Up to three-quarters of academic faculty report not having a mentor (Carey and Weissman 2010). Women and individuals from groups underrepresented in academic medicine report increased difficulty establishing effective mentoring relationships (Foust-Cummings et al. 2011). Cultural differences, differing communication styles, implicit bias, and assumptions about others may serve as barriers or adversely affect mentoring relationships (Osman and Gottlieb 2018). Additionally, mentoring effectiveness may be limited by competing obligations, mentor fatigue, or a lack of training and experience in mentorship and cultural competence. In order to avoid these pitfalls, many authors and mentor training programs have emphasized the skills and attributes effective mentors need to develop (Cho et al. 2011; Khan et al. 2017; Steiner et al. 2004). In this article, we focus on the role of the mentee, and the essential characteristics, skills and

responsibilities necessary to ensure that their own mentoring needs are met.

The concept of 'mentoring up' was adapted from the business concept of 'managing up' and has been described as 'a concept that empowers mentees to be active participants in their mentoring relationships by shifting the emphasis from the mentors' responsibilities in the mentor-mentee relationship to equal emphasis on the mentees' contributions (Lee et al. 2015)'. 'Mentoring up' acknowledges that mentorship is a mutual relationship, and encourages mentees to be proactive participants that drive the relationship to ensure desired results (Persons et al. 2018).

The twelve tips described below are important strategies for fostering a mentee-driven mentoring relationship and ultimately 'mentoring up'.

Tip 1

Choose your own mentor(s)

For many trainees and junior faculty, identifying a mentor is a daunting task. For this reason, many programs have been established to match and assign mentoring pairs or groups. These programs, however, are not universally available. In addition, research has shown that mentoring relationships are more successful and participants have higher levels of satisfaction when mentors are selected by the aspiring mentee directly (Persons et al. 2018).

To select a mentor, begin by identifying your needs, the type of guidance that would be most helpful, and the skill set you seek in a mentor. Next, brainstorm a list of individuals whose work and accomplishments you admire. Talk with peers both inside and outside of your department and institution to get recommendations (Ramanan et al. 2002;

Jackson et al. 2003; Zerzan et al. 2009). Do not limit yourself by department, specialty, academic rank, age, gender or racial and ethnic background. Establishing mentoring relationships across cultural differences may require more effort; however, it is helpful to have mentors with diverse perspectives.

Often, before asking someone to be your mentor, you will want to get to know them. Set up a meeting or lunch and assess their availability and willingness to discuss career accomplishments and goals, whether you have compatible communication styles and values and whether you feel inspired to maintain a longterm professional relationship with them. We suggest having upfront conversations where different values, biases, and assumptions driven by gender, generational, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences are acknowledged, along with an explicit ask of mentors for their expectations and guidance in navigating cultural and interpersonal expectations (Osman and Gottlieb 2018). The more thoughtful investigative work you do upfront, the more likely you are to find a 'good fit'.

Tip 2

Build a mentorship network

All mentors have different strengths and weaknesses. It is unlikely that a single individual would be able to perfectly fill the role of professional coach, research advisor, project sponsor, institutional advocate, and personal confidante. Establishing a network of mentors who offer diverse perspectives, a complement of insights, a wide range of skills, and various talents is critical. Throughout school, training, and your professional career, you should develop and maintain a network of peer, step-ahead, and senior mentors that provide guidance across the spectrum of your clinical work, academic goals, and personal life. This allows you to identify the greatest added values of each mentor in your network and allow them to engage in your relationship in a more focused and less demanding or time consuming manner (Jackson et al. 2003; Chopra et al. 2016).

Cultivating a network of mentors is especially important for individuals from underrepresented groups in academic medicine. While same-identity mentoring relationships provide important psychosocial support and interpersonal comfort, the small number from underrepresented groups in academic medicine make it less likely that mentees will find a mentor of the same racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or gender identity who is also advanced in their career and with a similar scholarly focus. You should not limit yourself from the important personal, social, and career benefits of establishing mentoring relationships across demographic and cultural identities. Cross-identity mentors in senior level positions may be better positioned to help you navigate institutional structures, lend social capital, identify opportunities, and advocate for your promotions.

Tip 3

Don't make your mentor guess what your needs and priorities are

Once you identify an individual you seek mentorship from, do not leave it up to this mentor to figure out your needs and how to mentor you. You know yourself best.

Start with introspection. Spend time defining your goals and identify gaps in knowledge and skills that serve as barriers to achieving those goals (Zerzan et al, 2009). Next, consider your mentor's strengths and what domains you wish to cultivate from this relationship (e.g. personal, professional development, skill development, academic guidance, or research). From this starting point you will be able to work with your mentor to further refine your goals, identify actionable steps towards achieving those goals, and establish the frequency at which you should touch base. Be prepared to express your needs clearly and prioritize discussion points such that during your meetings you can focus on what's most important (Chopra et al. 2016). Knowing exactly what you want out of each meeting enables you to leave with specific guidance and strategic ideas to successfully plan and accomplish your goals.

Tip 4

Set realistic expectations

Your mentor is invested in helping you cultivate your skills and accomplish your goals but does not have a magic wand to get you there. As a mentee, you must set attainable goals and maintain discipline to achieve them. Avoid overcommitting to requests – despite interest or perceived career benefit – as the result is often diminished quality of work and burnout (Vaughn et al. 2017). Finally, align expectations such that both you and your mentor have a shared understanding of your goals and what one another expects from the relationship. Reflect, communicate, and realign these expectations on a regular basis (Lee et al. 2015). When you experience differences, engage in exploratory conversation rather than avoid difficult topics (Osman and Gottlieb 2018). This will improve the mentoring relationship.

Tip 5

Help your mentor do their job well

Proactively consider what actions you can take to save your mentor time, remove busy work, and allow your mentor to support you to their fullest ability. Help your mentor prepare for meetings by providing an agenda and actions they can take in advance. For example, ask them to review a grant opportunity or leadership course you are interested in and would like to discuss. When you identify issues and roadblocks to your success, try to propose potential solutions to aid your mentor in helping you navigate these issues. When requesting a recommendation, present your mentor with a thoughtful and comprehensive list of your characteristics and qualifications that would contribute to a strong letter. These actions all act to offload the burden of work from your mentor and will make your mentoring relationship less frustrating and more rewarding for both of you (Lee et al. 2015).

Tip 6

Show interest and maintain regular communication

As a mentee, you should take the initiative to maintain the mentoring relationship. Do not wait for your mentor to

reach out and ask if they can guide you. Stay engaged, energized, and invested. By showing interest, they will reciprocate and take interest in your growth and development.

Ask your mentor directly about their preferred communication style and their preferred frequency of information exchange. Having insight into both your own and your mentor's communication preferences allows your interactions to be more meaningful (Lee et al. 2015). Set a goal of regularly touching base – even briefly or casually – with your mentor (e.g. at least four times per year). Place reminders in your calendar and develop a regular cadence of communication at predictable intervals.

Tip 7

Respect your mentor's time

Coming to mentoring meetings prepared with an agenda and specific questions is important. Be on time to meetings and do not back out at the last minute. Being reliable and timely is just as critical to your relationship's success. During your meetings, stick to your agenda and be succinct in your explanations and comments (Chin et al. 1998). Watch for clues that you may be rambling or losing engagement of your mentor. In the event that there is no new progress or issue to review, keep the meeting as short as possible or consider cancelling in advance and postponing to a later date (Zerzan et al. 2009).

Tip 8

Ask for feedback and take actions based on the feedback

Feedback can be difficult to receive but nevertheless is critical to your continued professional growth and development (Chin et al. 1998; Ramanan et al. 2002). A mentor who is willing to give feedback is likely doing so because they are invested in you. Mentors appreciate mentees who are proactive about asking for feedback on specific issues and who are open to hearing about deficiencies and blind spots without becoming defensive. If you are having a hard time receiving feedback without feeling immediately defensive, ask to schedule a follow up meeting and discuss the feedback after you have had time to think it over.

Next, demonstrate accountability by following through on the feedback received. If you find that you do not agree with your mentor's assessment or advice, try to have an open conversation and aim to understand your mentor's perspective. Follow up with a note summarizing the discussion and your plans to proceed. Demonstrating your openness to feedback and purposeful follow through will keep your mentor engaged and strengthen your relationship (Zerzan et al. 2009).

Tip 9

Be gracious and appreciative

Mentors volunteer their time to guide their mentees. They take time away from their own career development and personal life to offer you their experience, guidance,

network, and insight. Thank them personally and express gratitude outwardly for their time and efforts. Remember that, like you, your mentor has goals for career development and advancement. Offer to write letters of recommendation for them. Speak positively about them with peers and leadership. Be generous and gracious in giving them credit for your accomplishments. Expressions of your appreciation leave a powerful reminder of why their investment in your mentoring relationship is worth it (Chin et al. 1998; Saha et al. 1999).

Tip 10

Keep it strictly professional

Keeping your mentoring relationship professional does not mean you cannot be yourself or be friendly. It is important to get to know your mentor: who they are as a person, what drives them, how they achieved their current accomplishments, what lessons they learned along the way, what their current priorities are, and what their future goals are. However, maintaining boundaries is important to ensure that both you and your mentor are comfortable. If you are open to a more friendship-based connection, ensure reciprocity and let your mentor take the lead in its establishment. Do not intrude on your mentor's personal life or expect social invitations.

Furthermore, mentors and mentees should strive to model ethical behavior. While doing so, they must maintain open communication about ethical grey areas and acknowledge unequal power dynamics or issues pertaining to equity and inclusion (Lee et al. 2015).

Tip 11

When it is time to move on, be sure to end on a positive note

As you advance in your career, achieve milestones, or refocus goals, you may reach a point in which it makes sense to end a mentoring relationship. Alternatively, relationships may deteriorate due to misalignment of goals, commitment, or expectations. Occasionally, there may be power issues, generational tensions, or personality clashes. In any situation, if you find yourself ready to move on from a mentoring relationship, attempt to frame the separation in a positive light, express gratitude, and keep the possibility open to return to your mentor for assistance or advice in the future (Zerzan et al. 2009).

Tip 12

Be a mentor yourself

Mentors hope to make an impact on mentees who in turn pay it forward. Everyone has knowledge and experiences to share. Whether you are an undergraduate student advising a high schooler, a resident advising a medical student, or a junior faculty member advising a fellow - with every advancement or transition you make, there are many others striving to accomplish what you have. Serving as a mentor allows you to learn from others' perspectives, enhance advising skills, explore problem solving, develop leadership

qualities, support diversity and inclusion, and feel valued by giving back. In addition, by acting as a mentor yourself, your relationships with your own mentors are enhanced.

Conclusion

Mentorship is critical to the personal and professional success of academic careers. However, quality mentorship can be difficult to find, and if established, may still be ineffective. In response, we share the concept of 'mentoring up' in which mentees are encouraged to be proactive participants in their mentoring relationships. These twelve tips are an important starting point for mentees eager to cultivate and maintain quality mentoring relationships. Developing and employing these skills and tools will allow individuals to drive those relationships in a direction that serves their needs, while simultaneously earning the trust, confidence, and good will of their mentors.

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Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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