

Reflections on mentoring

As I enter the latter part of Erik Erikson's "generative" phase,¹ I feel that my most meaningful, and hopefully enduring, legacy is that of mentorship. I owe the shape of my career to some amazing mentors, classically defined as those who provide support, guidance, and education as the mentee develops his or her professional career. I entered medical school with an interest in psychiatry, but was unexpectedly attracted to surgery. I took several clerkships with a brilliant and caring general surgeon, William Silen, watching him with patients in the operating room, postoperatively, and in clinic. Despite beginning rounds every morning at 5 AM and a "36 on, 12 off" schedule, I loved it; but the schedule of a surgeon in those days was incompatible with having the family I wanted. In a last fling with a surgical clerkship, I rotated through Boston Children's Hospital's cardiac surgical service with Aldo Castaneda, who had just been recruited from Minnesota. In those days, medical students scrubbed on operations, inserted arterial lines, placed chest tubes, and were fully integrated into the team. It was magical. In residency and fellowship, Dr Alexander Nadas was everywhere in evidence, melding his wit and humanity with rigor and an unwavering commitment to the best patient care. Dr Donald Fyler provided scientific guidance with his passion for studying practice variation and outcomes research in the New England Regional Infant Cardiac Program. Each of these individuals was profoundly different in his style and skill, and each was inspirational. These mentors served as role models as well as teachers.

Today, a more transactional spin is placed on the mentor-mentee relationship. Fellows and junior faculty are told they need to choose a mentor to facilitate their career advancement and productivity. Indeed, mentorship is a featured topic at early career sessions of virtually every academic meeting. Good mentorship does help trainees build research skills, allocate their time wisely, write more abstracts and papers, garner grants, and learn the unwritten rules of career advancement.² Particularly for trainees, mentors can provide sustaining funds, equipment, and research assistants. Mentors can advance relationships of early career faculty with experts outside their institution and enhance their regional and national reputations by nominating them as invited speakers or for roles on committees in national professional organizations.³ Much like a coach, a mentor can push mentees to take some risks and stretch outside their comfort zones by providing a safety net. The mentor can also be a confidante who helps works with the mentee in reaching career decisions or negotiating interpersonal problems.

What are the skills of the best mentor? I do not believe there is a single right or wrong answer here. It all depends upon the skills and

needs of both parties. Ideally, the mentor is an expert in a field, but more important than knowledge in this era of electronic resources is the ability to teach intellectual discipline and critical thinking. Great mentors keep their egos in check and give feedback in ways that inspire and motivate without diminishing trainees' confidence. Mentorship requires investment in the mentee's success and commitment of time, the scarcest commodity in academics.

What should one look for in a mentor? The concept of a single mentor and protégé has been largely supplanted by a model in which one has multiple mentors for different aspects of one's career. For example, a mentee could have one mentor who is tightly focused on teaching a specific research technique (eg, bioinformatics), another who teaches a clinical skill (eg, cardiac intensive care), and a third who models work-life balance.⁴ Mentor-mentee relationships can be formal or informal. Mosaic and collaborative mentoring allow mentees the ability to work with multiple mentors who provide complementary skills. Although mentors are traditionally senior to their mentees, they do not need to be old (although the perspective of years can help!). Moreover, fellows and junior faculty can provide critical academic advice to each other, and practical advice is often rendered by individuals just one step ahead in the career process.⁵

Mentorship on training grants requires some particular pointers. For some funding agencies, having a mentor who is not only an authority in the field but also has a track record with that sponsor gives the application a strong leg up. Successful applications often have cosponsors with different skills that help the trainees at the interface of a discipline (eg, health services research) with a clinical specialty (eg, cardiology). When local expertise is lacking, inclusion of a remote mentor is increasingly common.

What makes a mentor-mentee relationship successful? For formal research or career mentors, fellows and junior faculty should schedule regular meetings to outline goals and timelines. At the end of the meeting, it is helpful to generate a short set of minutes with action items for the next meeting, because memories can fade. Mentor and mentee must be able to put themselves in the other's shoes. For example, a mentor must understand when a trainee has ongoing stress that is personal or schedule related. Similarly, a mentee should be sensitive to the mentor's attending schedule, grant deadlines, and travel. In the uncommon event that the relationship just doesn't work, the mentee should move on.

Most of my own early mentors have passed on, and few of the younger generation recognize the contributions of these giants. However, they live on in the values and wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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