



Challenges and Solutions in Mentoring Relationships

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Mentoring relationships are critical for developing a successful career in academic and non-academic aging. Traditionally, the mentor-mentee relationship features an experienced and established professional who mentors a junior professional. However, mentorship can occur at all career stages. Mentees gain valuable insight into their field, receive valuable feedback for professional growth, develop an authentic relationship based on mutual interests, and obtain networking opportunities provided by the mentor. In turn, the mentor is a trusted advisor, but also gains valuable insight into his or her field from the perspective of a junior professional, and also has a chance to give back to the profession and hone his or her leadership skills.

Mentoring relationships can take many different forms. Reverse mentoring, which may stand alone or serve as a component of many traditional mentoring relationships, entails the more junior person imparting ideas and experience to the more senior person. Peer mentorship is an intentional relationship between two people in similar stages of their careers, and usually includes holding each other accountable and serving as one another's champions.

Identifying a great mentor is one component for a meaningful mentorship; however, it is essential to prepare for common pitfalls and challenges that frequently occur. Perhaps the most common initial challenge in a mentoring relationship is a lack of clearly defined goals. The difference between a flourishing or foundering mentorship rests in establishing explicit and mutual goals. Goals should be specific, measurable, realistic, time-bound, and satisfy both parties. Therefore, it is important to discuss the purpose of the proposed mentoring relationship. For example, some mentorships may focus on a particular event or a time-limited role, such as how to prepare for a job talk. The mentor and mentee should clearly communicate their individual expectations and roles with a defined end point. Whether the goal of the relationship is a short-term objective or a longer relationship, it is important to clearly describe what each party hopes to accomplish. For example, the goal of a mentoring relationship between a junior faculty member and a senior faculty member may be centered on adjusting to an academic environment. In this instance, the mentor may want to collaborate on grants and help increase the mentee's knowledge of the skills to advance to tenure; while the mentee will schedule regular meetings with the mentor to discuss how to advance in the field, and have measurable expectations such as submit two grants in an academic year.

Another common problem is the perception that a mentoring relationship is time consuming. Professionals at all career stages are busy, and senior professionals in particular are likely to be juggling a number of competing interests including multiple mentoring relationships. A good way to ensure that a relationship is mutually respectful of time constraints is to formally discuss a plan for meeting and for checking in. This can vary significantly depending on the individuals involved; some mentors and mentees have a designated hour long meeting each week, while others touch base by e-mail and have few in-person interactions. The important element is that the frequency and duration of contact is mutually agreed upon and satisfactory to both parties.

The power differential between a mentor and mentee may also serve as a challenge in the relationship. Sensitivity to societal and structural power and privilege goes a long way toward effective mentoring. Open communication and getting to know one another on an individual level are good first steps to bridging a power differential. Similarly, communication and seeking to understand one another's perspective are important elements of cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring relationships.

Finally, it is possible that personality conflicts render a mentoring relationship ineffective. Although mentoring is not dependent on personality, the fit between two individuals is an important element of mentorship. If a relationship seems to be a poor fit, it may be necessary for both parties to discuss mutually satisfactory solutions such as identifying a new mentor or establishing more concrete relationship boundaries to accomplish mentoring goals without friction.

Although challenges are likely to arise in any human relationship, mentoring relationships are a uniquely powerful alliance with important benefits for the mentee, the mentor, and the field of aging research. It is worth the effort to start out on the right foot with clearly defined goals and expectations, and to work through any problems that arise along the way.