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Perspective: Top 10 Tips for Mentors

Whether you've been a mentor before or you're just making the transition from mentee to mentor, it is always a good idea to review the basics of mentoring. As a mentor, you will provide psychosocial support to your mentee by encouraging him or her and listening, and you will contribute to your mentee's career progression through guidance and by introducing him or her to your network. A trusted mentor is also an individual with whom a mentee can safely try out new ideas and sort out priorities.

You need to resist the urge to act and make decisions for your mentee and instead do the difficult task of listening. Stop, focus, and listen.

As in " **Top 10 Tips to Maximize Your Mentoring**

(<http://community.sciencecareers.org/ctscinet/articles/2009/08/perspective-top-10-tips-to-maximize-your-mentoring.php>) , we've listed below our top 10 tips for being an effective mentor, presented David Letterman style -- in reverse order and saving the best for last. These suggestions are intended to help those of you transitioning from mentee to mentor in the clinical and/or translational research setting; however, they are easily applicable to scientists in any field and at any career stage.

10. Assess your mentoring skills.

You have already determined that you have the interest and time to commit to mentoring a postdoctoral fellow, clinical fellow, graduate student, junior faculty member, or other member of your research team. Now is the ideal time to take an inventory of your mentoring skills. Reviewing your skills with the use of a mentoring skills inventory (like the one at right) can help you identify areas of strength and comfort as well as skills that require attention. You don't need to be an expert in all of the skills on that list as long as you are willing to grow and learn alongside your mentee.

In addition to the skills inventory, take time to reflect on how it felt to be starting out your own research journey -- with excitement and trepidation, anxious to make a difference. Think about the guidance that was the most helpful -- and less than helpful -- to you as you traveled your career path.

9. Start out right, with goal setting.

A lot of pieces need to align as you set out on a new mentoring relationship, right down to the logistical issues of when, where, and how frequently to meet. The key element is taking time from the outset to listen to each others' goals and expectations for the mentoring relationship. Taking time to appreciate and understand your mentee's goals will demonstrate your commitment to his professional development and career success.

| Mentoring Skills Inventory | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rate your current level of skill on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being uncomfortable and 5 being confident. | | | | | |
| 1. Building and maintaining relationships | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Identifying and addressing a mentee's needs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Communicating | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Encouraging | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Listening | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Devising | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Planning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Goal setting | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Problem solving | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Mentoring | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

A mentoring skills inventory can help you identify strengths and weaknesses in your mentoring skills. **View full size (/get-file.xqy?uri=/aaas/files/uploaded-**

Effective goals could be narrowly related to completion of a specific research-related task or more expansive, such as regular appraisal of career progression.

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This is also an ideal time to express what you expect from this relationship, including your goals for the next steps and a discussion of boundaries as needed, so you and your mentee can start on the same page.

8. Begin with the right project.

If you are serving both as mentor and principal investigator, it is a good idea to find the right project to build your mentee's confidence with some early success while preparing her with skills for the longer-term research studies that may be both riskier and more difficult. This is where your experience and wisdom will come into play. Carefully set the stage for some early "wins" that will sustain interest and excitement over the long haul.



This is part of an article series for **CTSciNet** (<http://community.sciencecareers.org/ctscinet/>), the Clinical and Translational Science Network, an online community. These articles are published on both Science Careers and within **CTSciNet** (<http://community.sciencecareers.org/ctscinet/articles/>).

7. Live your professional standards.

Essential to an effective mentoring relationship are the values of trust and respect, the hallmarks of integrity in any professional relationship. It is vital that you serve as a role model for high standards of professionalism. This includes keeping discussions confidential so that your mentee knows that discussions with you are "safe." Development of mutual trust will ensure that your mentee is comfortable sharing a novel idea and expressing confusion or concern about his research or an idea -- thoughts the mentee could never afford to reveal in a larger setting. An effective mentor creates a safe place for the mentee to ask questions and discuss uncertainties -- without judgment. Clinicians and educators would never intentionally violate the privacy of a patient or student; consider your role as a mentor in the same light.

6. Tune up your listening skills.

As a mentor and a generous and engaged professional, you will be eager to jump in and assist your mentee. However, you need to resist the urge to act and make decisions for your mentee and instead do the difficult task of listening. Stop, focus, and listen. Avoid bringing the frenzy of your daily work to time you share with your mentee. Some mentees may need time to reflect and formulate ideas. Other mentees may thrive with an active and rapid exchange. Each mentee will be unique. Do your best to ask probing questions and sit back to listen to the thoughts of a creative, talented, and highly motivated junior colleague light up the room.

5. Take an interest in your mentee.

Having someone at work who cares about you as a person and encourages your development is positively correlated to productivity, according to Gallup surveys of more than 100,000 employees. You can be the person in your organization who has that positive effect on your mentee.

At the same time that mentees are engaged in the task of establishing their professional identities, they are often experiencing tremendous changes in their lives outside of work. Take a genuine interest in your mentee -- her interests, dreams, and aspirations. Be aware of other real-life issues that may impinge on productivity in the lab. Acknowledge that there are differences between you and your mentee that transcend the obvious ones of gender, age, and heritage. Care and concern for your mentee can be the key to providing him with the confidence to flourish.

4. Seed your mentee's growth.

Just as a farmer has to fertilize at the right time and dig out the weeds at other times, you need to find a dynamic balance between supporting and challenging your mentee. Supporting your mentee will include providing him with information, feedback on his progress, emotional support, and advocacy as needed. Challenging your mentee will encourage him to always set and maintain high standards of practice, encourage the risk-taking needed for exploration of innovative and creative ideas, and help him develop the persistence to reach difficult goals.

Foster your mentee's autonomy and independence by encouraging your mentee to "own" the mentoring relationship by coming prepared to your meetings, setting the agenda, doing the follow-up, and so on. Look for times to celebrate a milestone or accomplishment of your mentee; nothing makes a researcher stand tall like praise from colleagues.

3. Provide feedback that can be heard.

Among the most difficult arts of being a mentor is providing -- and receiving -- feedback. Yes, feedback should be mutual.

First, let's focus on providing feedback. You may have the very best of intentions and even the right ideas, but if you do not provide feedback in a way that works for your mentee, the opportunity for a constructive conversation will most likely be lost. Take time to give credit where credit is due, especially if your mentee demonstrated outstanding leadership or took the initiative in solving a difficult task -- qualities that are worth reinforcing.

When your mentee has some areas that need to be strengthened, choose the time and place for this conversation carefully and try to listen. Keep in mind that there may be a legitimate reason for your mentee's sluggishness in achieving success. More than likely, your mentee is considerably more upset with a lack of progress or a setback than you are; you know that such events are a normal part of the challenging world of scientific research. Your positive and nonreactive response to resolving setbacks will help your mentee develop his or her own resilience and tenacity.

Remember to occasionally seek feedback yourself from your mentee. Consider inquiring on a periodic basis what you might do to improve communications in your mentoring relationship. Your mentee will probably be reluctant to say anything negative; directly seeking feedback will give her explicit permission to comment on nascent problems in your relationship.

2. Share your network.

Today's world of team science to address complex questions requires one to work with numerous collaborators both within and outside of your organization. Developing a professional network takes time and years of practice, but you can accelerate the process for your mentee by making introductions.

Introduce him to other individuals who may be valuable resources or future collaborators. Consider offering a seminar invitation to your mentee. A well-timed seminar presentation can be a wonderful opportunity to hone speaking skills and showcase his research. Propose sessions at conferences that include your mentee as a speaker. When attending professional meetings, consider including your mentee in informal meals with colleagues. Always look for opportunities to open a new door into your network.

1. Enjoy the mentoring ride.

Mentoring is one of the joys of academic life in a research community that brings considerable meaning to all that we do. You will follow the career progress of your mentees and will likely be amazed at all the things they attempt and achieve. Savor being proud of your mentees. In a few short years, mentees who started their research training under your guidance will be leading projects, studies, laboratories, institutes, centers, schools, and even universities. Remember that your mentees may turn out to be very special, life-long colleagues.

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