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Editorial

Successful Mentor-Mentee Relationship



Mentorship plays an immensely important role in the development of young academic surgeons. Most departments of surgery, however, do not have formalized mentorship programs.¹ In this letter, the Committee on Academic Advancement of the Association for Academic Surgery has highlighted some important elements in a bullet point checklist format for sustaining and optimizing mentor-mentee relationships (Figure).

How to be a successful mentor

Mentor was to whom Odysseus entrusted the care of his son Telemachus when he left Ithaca to fight in the Trojan war. To this day, the term represents a trustworthy individual with experience who selflessly guides and advises a younger individual in his or her development. Following are some summary tips for being a successful mentor.

- Make time. The success of any effective mentoring relationship depends on allocating the appropriate amount of time to discuss topics and issues important to the mentee. Everyone is busy between clinical work, academic responsibilities, and personal matters, so it is important to make sure you set aside defined time so you can give matters your full attention.
- Listen. Oftentimes, as a mentor, you are expected to do more of the talking and provide advice. It is equally important, however, to listen to the particular goals and concerns of the mentee to be a successful mentor.
- Be selfless. Provide advice and guidance that you truly believe are in the best interests of the mentee. Keep in mind that your mentee's interests and priorities may not always coincide with yours (even though many times they may); try to see things from your mentee's perspective. Remember, you succeed as a mentor when your mentee succeeds.
- Meet regularly with your mentee and keep good notes. Keeping good annotation of goals and concerns discussed is important to assess progress and developments from meeting to meeting.
- Recognize your limitations ("Know thyself"—ancient Greek maxim). Realize that you may not be in the best position to provide the best guidance, advice, or support in all matters. Help steer your mentee to the appropriate people who can for these matters. Remember to keep the interest of your mentee as a priority.

- Stay with the times. Recognize that priorities, interests, etc., may have changed because you were developing professionally. It is important to stay in tune with what new opportunities may be best for your mentee. In addition, it is important to recognize the mentee's needs may evolve with time, making the relationship a dynamic one.²
- Celebrate the journey. Celebrate and take pride in the accomplishments of your mentee along the way—they are a reflection of your collective collaborative work.

How to be a successful mentee

Although there is a significant body of literature on the attributes of effective mentors, less information is available on the attributes of a successful mentee.³ Following are some important mentee qualities which may help to develop a productive mentor-mentee relationship.

- Be proactive in reaching out to faculty members inside and outside your institution to identify mentors who align with your goals and can help advance your career. Usually, an organically derived mentor-mentee relationship is more successful than an assigned one. Strong mentorship is essential to your success both in clinical and academic endeavors.^{4,5}
- Diversify. You will need multiple mentors to help you overcome the hurdle of training, clinical practice, research endeavors, and even personal life. It is rare to find one mentor with all the required traits and the time to address all your needs and questions.⁶
- Be clear about your career goals. Whether you want to pursue an academic career or be part of a private practice, it's important to determine your goals early in training and thereafter to identify the right mentors. This will provide you with time to build trust and foster the strong relationships that will be needed to fulfill your ambitions.
- Set realistic expectations. Clearly discuss with your mentor what you expect from the relationship and what your needs are. This will provide the mentor the opportunity to clarify which needs he/she can successfully meet and the limitations on doing so. A mentor-mentee agreement early in the relationship will help build trust and prevent any disappointment that can arise if both parties have different expectations.
- Be organized. When meeting with your mentor, have a simple, measurable, and attainable plan. Be realistic and

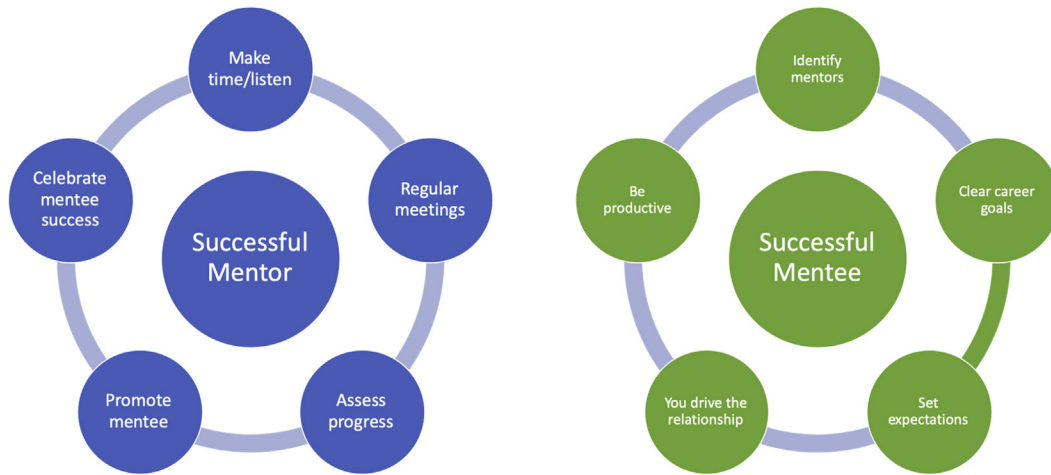


Fig – Important elements to optimize mentor-mentee relationship.

have a timetable to achieve your goals. The mentor is there to facilitate and guide you through your plans and not to spoon-feed you.

- Be an active listener. Be ready to accept constructive feedback, do not be defensive, be open to new ideas, and always have a positive attitude. Integrate the learning points from each meeting and respect your mentor's input. On the other hand, be involved, express your own ideas, and challenge your mentors candidly.
- Be productive. Once a goal is determined, set deadlines and deliver on your promises. You need to show that you are enthusiastic about what you do and that you can move forward with the plan. If there are obstacles that hinder your progress, discuss them early with your mentor and work on finding solutions. Demonstrate that you fulfilled your commitments by following your mentor's advice.
- Be professional. Respect your mentor's time, appreciate his/her input, acknowledge his/her help, and avoid intruding in his/her personal life. Allow the mentor to take the lead in establishing a friendship-based connection.
- You drive the ship, so make the relationship your priority, own it, and devote the time needed to maintain it so that both parties benefit.⁶ If successful, acknowledge and appreciate your mentor's efforts and celebrate. If not productive, do not blame your mentor. Instead, be professional and do not burn bridges. Reassess your goals and find a new mentor.
- Stay in touch even after achieving your goals. This is a lifelong relationship!

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