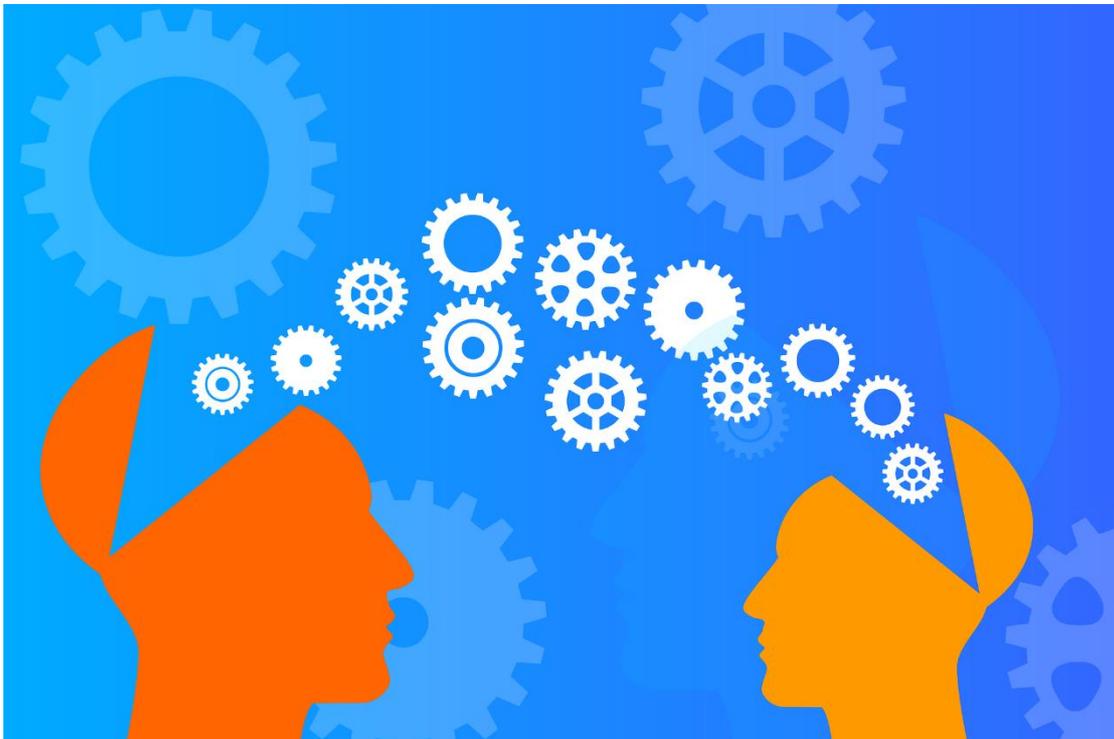


Mentoring – Being a Mentee



A Guide for Researchers

Resource 2 of 4

***“A mentor is someone who allows you to know that no matter how dark the night, in the morning, joy will come”
Oprah Winfrey***

One of the most important questions you should ask yourself before you join an institutional mentoring scheme or look independently for a mentor concerns purpose. Take a moment to consider the following enquiry.

Enquiry

As a potential mentee what do you actually want from a mentoring relationship?

Oft-reported benefits to research mentees include:

- Validation and empowerment from respected members of the research community
- Increased confidence in current work and future possibilities
- Greater awareness of the wider context of their environment
- Exposure to new ideas and thought processes
- Increased capacity to make strategic decisions
- Stronger resilience (if only by hearing that others have been through the same challenges)
- An expanded network
- Increased likelihood of being put forward for opportunities

There are many *potential* benefits from a successful mentoring relationship, and many of these can emerge serendipitously, however – it is worth spending some time reflecting on what you actually need and asking what *sort* of support and challenge you require.

In this resource we'll examine:

1. What to look for in a mentor
2. How to approach a mentor and what to say so they agree to mentor you
3. How to design a relationship that works for you
4. How to get the best out of your mentoring conversations
5. Possible difficulties and what you can do if the relationship isn't working

What to look for in a mentor

“You don’t choose your mentors for their success. You chose them for their character.”

Jim Collins

Once you’re clear about what you want from a mentor you can then start considering your ‘known’ and ‘by reputation’ networks to work out who the right people are who can help. Seek out ‘good’ people who are happy to share their insight, knowledge and experiences – but, vitally, also to listen to yours. You should probably look beyond the obvious notion of professional seniority – since this does not always equate to being a better mentor.

Enquiry
 Who are the ‘good’ academics in your department?
 What in this context does ‘good’ mean to you?

Look for mentors based on

- People skills / empathy / emotional intelligence
- Previous record of developing their people and teams
- Their specialism
- The contextual overlap between their career trajectory and yours
- Track record of delivering success

It’s well worth considering the compatibility of your mutual values and general viewpoints. (Asking someone how do they choose and priorities their different tasks and opportunities will give a pretty good indication of what they value.)

Do your homework. If you can, you might want to have conversations with their team and colleagues and find out what they’re like. (Again, a long publication list doesn't give any indication of whether someone will be a good mentor.)

Even more fundamentally (as Guccione and Hutchinson 2021) point out, you should ask yourself these basic mentor questions. Do not compromise!

Will they keep what you say confidential?	Will they listen carefully first, before advising or making suggestions?	Can they make this partnership about you, not about them?
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If a prospective mentor is less well known to you, it is worth one or two tentative conversations to build trust and establish, in your own mind, satisfactory answers to

these questions. Since the mentor will be the more professionally experienced party in the relationship the onus should be placed upon them clarify these areas. If however, this does not happen it is perfectly acceptable for the mentee to clarify their concerns with a simple “Can I just check something...?” question.

Think of any other things that might be important to you in choosing the right mentor(s). Factors to consider might include:

- Background in a specific culture
- Gender or ethnicity
- Industrial experience
- International working
- Part-time working or has negotiated a career break (e.g. maternity or paternity)
- Overcome barriers (e.g. from a marginalised group) to achieve success

Ensure, as in the previous section, that they understand what you need in terms of balance of the types of support and challenge and don't be afraid to be explicit about this as your relationship develops.

How to approach a mentor and what to say so they agree to mentor you

Remember that mentoring is usually an unpaid, voluntary role. Remember that ‘good’ academic citizens end up doing far more than their fair share of valuable activities like mentoring and this over-contribution is amplified hugely with professionals from minority or intersectional backgrounds. They are allowed to say ‘no’ and if they do you should respond respectfully.

However, to encourage a potential mentor to want to work with you they need to understand that they can (painlessly) fill the need that you have without any conflict of interests. They also need to see that you understand a) what mentoring is and what it is not (see our first resource in this mentoring series) and b) that you are sensitive to the time commitment a mentoring role may require. Starting with a generic “Will you be my mentor?” may not get the answer you want. Show that you understand the potential value of *mentoring*.

As such, from the very start tell them:

- Who you are (if they don't already know you well)
- Where you're heading in your career (you may wish to be *carefully* vulnerable here)
- What your upcoming priorities are (be clear on these)
- How mentoring will help with these priorities

Also, you will need (implicitly or explicitly) to:

- Show clarity of expectation in what you are looking for and make your aims very clear.
- Articulate that you recognise your role as a mentee is the active role, not a passive one and that you will do the work on your development
- Make it clear that you don't expect them to take any action on your behalf or give you resource or a position.

Vitality:

- Tell them why you chose them, specifically. Mention the experiences, skills and attributes you observe they have, and how they would fit with your aims for the near future. (Show that you've noticed the 'how', not just the 'what'.)

Crucially, articulate what you want them to say 'yes' to. (If part of a mentoring scheme, this part may be covered within the logistical terms of what both parties sign up to). What do you actually want from them?

- How much time do you think you'll need?
- Are there any timeframes or deadlines in play (e.g. for a fellowship application)
- How and where do you want to meet?

It's worth a tentative probationary agreement here (i.e. an hour a month for three months) which can always be extended if the relationship is working and benefiting both parties.

In the first 'recruitment' stages of a mentoring relationship (whether part of a matched scheme or not) it is understandable if there is a little trepidation from both parties. It is useful to set up at least one initial meeting (perhaps a zoom chat) before any more binding agreement is struck (a no-strings coffee, rather than a lifetime marriage...) to explore these areas. If either party feels that elements such as aligned values, confidentiality and respect are not present then it is unlikely that the relationship will work at all. If so, simply thank the other party for the conversation and venture no further.

How to design a relationship that works for you – both!

Ensuring a productive mentoring relationship is an iterative process, but it starts with clarity from day one. Moreover, it is ultimately the responsibility of the mentee to make it easy for the mentor to help them in the right manner – this requires conscious design and planning.

Enquiry

If you were starting a professional relationship with someone, what would both parties need to know about each other to make the relationship really work well? Think beyond the (open area) things that you might find on a curriculum vitae.

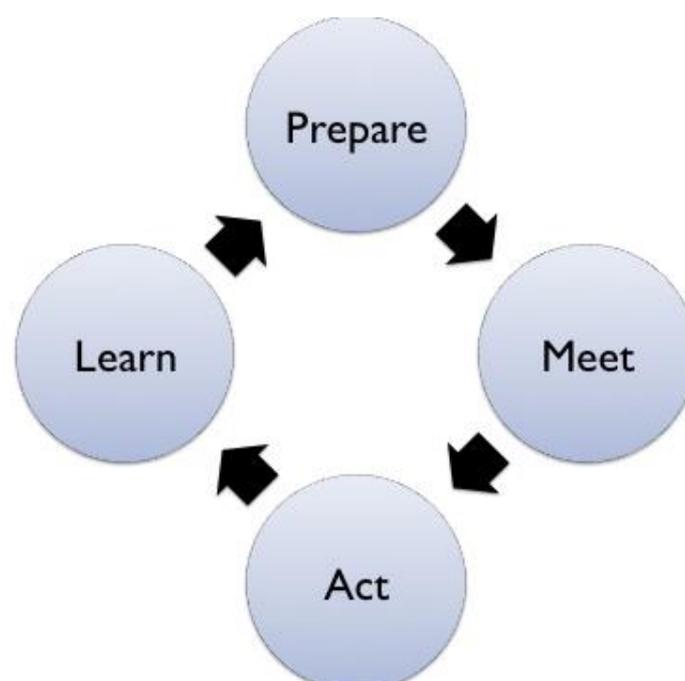
You may wish to explore these areas with your mentor and also be clear in your own mind about areas such as:

- How do I / we / you like to learn best?
- How best do I / we / you prefer to work?
- What sorts of goals motivate me/ you / us you most?
- What is really important to me/ you / us, professionally?
- Generally, what sort of support and challenge do I need?

If the mentoring relationship is centred around one specific element of practice (i.e. grant-writing or conference presentation) then this part of the early-stage design process may be minimal. For a more holistic longer-term mentoring relationship this may be a far more involved and iterative process.

For all the guidance and literature about mentoring it is worth remembering that some personalities simply gel better with each other than others. Some pairings won't 'work' as well as others. This doesn't mean they can't be productive, but recognise that they'll take more effort and preparation.

To maximize the return from a mentoring relationship, think of the mentor meetings as part of an experiential learning cycle.



Phase 1 - Prepare

Prepare for your sessions by considering

- What topics do you want to cover?
- What are the short / medium / long term goals at present and how will this meeting serve them
- What planning do you need to do for the meet
- What questions do you want to ask
- What problem do you want to solve or what decision do you want to make.

Phase 2 - Meet

During mentoring meetings discuss expectations and boundaries. Ask, listen and be open to suggestions and advice. Afterwards, you can decide for yourself how to proceed, and whether to accept any advice or not.

Phase 3 - Act

Do something. Show your mentor that you've acted as a result of the conversation. It's the mentee's role to feed-back and follow up. They've given time to help you. The least they can expect is for you to act – even if the action is contrary to their steer.

Phase 4 – Learn

Reflect, learn and consider both how the meeting went (actually tell your mentor what they did that was useful specifically and they'll do more of it next time...) and also what you've learned from the results of your actions. Use these learnings and reflections to prepare for your next meeting.

In short - Show that you have prepared. Show up. Show that you've processed and acted on what you've gained. When mentors see the *tangible* value they're bringing they will want to continue to invest.

How to get the most from mentoring conversations

Ensuring that a mentoring conversation is a useful one is rendered more simple for a mentee if the relationship is consciously designed, based on principles of trust, confidentiality and respect and is carefully planned as above. But here are some things that will help you to have better conversations.

- If you both decide on the boundaries of the conversation as part of the design (e.g. "would it be ok if we talked about...?") then you're unlikely to intrude into difficult territory or offend.
- If you're worried about not 'taking their advice' raise this as part of the design. You might need to explain why you didn't follow their path but good mentors don't expect blind compliance – they'd far rather you were honest.

- Be present. Show that you're actively listening to them. Note things down.
- Don't be afraid to ask honest open questions and don't be afraid of looking foolish or asking 'stupid' questions.
- It's worth spending a little time enquiring as to the state of things with your mentor ("How's *your* grant coming on?) and taking a professional interest in them.

You may want to give your mentor feedback after you meet about what helped specifically. Questions that help here include:

- How useful was the meeting for you, and why?
- What would like to focus more on in the next session? What would you like to move away from? (e.g. "Next time, I'd like to run a few options past you first.")
- Did you notice your thinking alter during the session? What activated this?
- What are your actions as a result of the conversation?

A oft-heard mentee complaint is that they're getting too much 'tell' and not enough 'listen'. (If your mentoring relationship is part of a scheme, you may wish to feed this back to the organiser, not as a personal complaint, but to help listening being emphasised in any mentor training). If this is the case, you may wish to share your plan and agenda because 'you know how busy they are'. This may encourage them to talk less... Also, if you feel it would be well-received, you could give them Resource 3 in this series – since in this resource we'll examine what effective mentors do (i.e. move beyond advice giving). (If it wouldn't be well-received, you chose your mentor poorly...see below)

What if the relationship isn't working?

Choosing the wrong mentor, or spending time in a relationship that isn't productive can hinder your career rather than enhance it. It's vital to dedicate time to reflect on how things are going. And if you decide things aren't working you need to act – not just ghost them. But there is no need to persist with a mentor you'd rather not work with.

- If you meet a couple of times and you aren't getting what you need, don't agonise over how to tell them. Firstly, thank them for their input. Even if they've not helped you they've given you precious time. This deserves genuine thanks.
- Tell them something you've achieved or realised as a result of meeting with them.

- Advise them you are now stepping back to consider what you've learned and prioritise for your next steps.
- If your relationship sits within an institutional scheme, inform the organisers.

Then start looking for another mentor, using the lessons learned from this unsuccessful experiment. Most, if not all, successful professionals have had proto-mentoring relationships that have not worked out.

Finally, it is worth noting that your experience as a mentee will be improved and enhanced by understanding the practice of a good mentor.

And at any level of life you can act as a mentor to those who come after you - so consider our third resource in this series 'Mentoring – Being a Mentor'.

Dr. Steve Hutchinson

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