

## MENTEE BEST PRACTICES

## Maximizing Mentorship: A Mentee Approach

Anna Volerman, MD; Valerie G. Press, MD, MPH; and Wei Wei Lee, MD, MPH

*Dr. Volerman is assistant professor at the Pritzker School of Medicine, Section of General Internal Medicine, University of Chicago; Dr. Press is assistant professor at the Pritzker School of Medicine, Section of Hospital Medicine, University of Chicago; and Dr. Lee is assistant dean of students and assistant professor at the Pritzker School of Medicine, Section of General Internal Medicine, University of Chicago.*

**M**entorship is essential for success in academic medicine. Studies demonstrate that mentoring is associated with many benefits: professional advancement, career performance, research productivity, career satisfaction, and work-life balance. Furthermore, both the mentor and mentee derive positive outcomes through a collaborative and reciprocal relationship.<sup>1</sup>

A mentor is traditionally a faculty member with advanced rank and experience who fosters the personal and professional development of individuals who are junior to them. Irrespective of their role as a student, resident, fellow, or junior faculty, the mentee plays a crucial role in establishing and cultivating the mentoring relationship.

“Managing up,” a model derived from the business world that describes the relationship between an employee and his/her supervisor, has been applied to mentoring in the academic setting. It implies that the mentee assumes a key role in guiding the relationship with the mentor.<sup>2</sup>

In academic medicine, mentees can adopt five practices as they work toward “managing up”:<sup>2</sup>

1. *Self-reflect.* First, mentees should consider prior experiences with mentorship and identify their individual values and work style. The mentee must ask: What motivates me? What do I value in my mentors and relationships? How do I learn best? What structure or direction do I need to succeed? The mentee should also consider specific knowledge and skill areas in need of development. Some examples include: networking,

understanding a department’s priorities, learning research methodologies, writing grants or papers, choosing jobs or opportunities, developing presentation skills, and working toward work-life balance. In addition, it is important for the mentee to establish career goals for both the short (i.e. three to 12 months) and long term (i.e. five to 10 years). Goals may connect back to the knowledge and skills areas previously identified. One useful framework for establishing goals is the “SMART” mnemonic: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.<sup>3</sup> This framework provides a well-defined pathway and builds motivation for success.

**Key point:** By defining his/her professional and personal needs and career aspirations, the mentee is in a position to maximize mentoring relationships.

2. *Identify mentors.* Individuals can seek mentors through a variety of channels. They can approach an assigned mentor or a faculty member they have met or worked with previously. Peers or those a few years more advanced can also recommend effective mentors. The mentee should meet with potential mentors to learn more about them and their academic work. During these meetings, mentees should evaluate whether this individual will be an effective mentor. Areas to consider include: competence in a professional field, confidence in his/her skills and ability to serve as a role model and advocate,

and commitment to mentee development. Mentees should also ask individuals they meet to suggest potential mentors. As a mentee meets potential mentors, there is no requirement to move forward with developing a formal mentoring relationship. After the initial meeting, it is helpful for the mentee to reflect on if and how this individual can meet his/her specific mentorship needs. It is important to remember that mentees benefit from having more than one mentor, with each advising about different needs and goals. Mentors at different stages in their careers also provide valuable perspectives to mentees.

**Key point:** Mentees should dedicate time to identifying mentors and consider establishing a mentoring relationship with multiple individuals possessing various skills and levels of training.

3. *Establish the mentoring relationship.* Once a mentor has been identified, the mentee should meet with him/her to evaluate his/her mentoring style and to establish and define the mentoring relationship. This is an opportunity for the mentor and mentee to share their backgrounds and establish their values, work style, needs, and goals as defined in the self-reflection stage. Once both individuals agree to work together in this capacity, the pair should establish objectives and structure for the relationship. This includes

continued on page 2

## MENTEE BEST PRACTICES

continued from page 1

delineating the purpose and goals of the interaction as well as a specific plan for feedback and evaluation. A mutual understanding of expectations is important for individuals to interact effectively. Key logistics to define include: meeting details (i.e. time, frequency, location); agenda format and topics (i.e. fixed vs. rotating topics, short term vs. long term, projects vs. goals); and preferred method of communication between meetings. These discussions lay the foundation for a working relationship built on mutual respect, well-defined expectations, and measurable outcomes.

**Key Point:** The mentee/mentor must establish clear objectives and guidelines prior to moving forward with the mentoring relationship.

4. *Cultivate the relationship.* Effective mentorship requires both individuals to take an active role. With an understanding of each individual's background and work style, the mentee can take responsibility for guiding the relationship. This model enables the mentor to most effectively provide support to the mentee based on his/her needs and goals. Regular communication and meetings allow the mentoring pair to continually

work toward established goals. Due to busy schedules and competing academic demands, meetings should be structured with an agenda balanced between ongoing projects and presentations and short- and long-term goals. The mentee should set the agenda for each meeting and come prepared with updates, ideas, and questions. During meetings, the mentee should communicate clearly, listen actively, and clarify discussion points. Each meeting should conclude with a review of action items and plan for follow-up and future meetings. Between meetings, the mentee should communicate regularly, follow through on tasks, and seek assistance as needed. Clear communication fosters the mentoring relationship and advances the proposed plan.

**Key Point:** The mentee has responsibility for maximizing the mentoring relationship.

5. *Refine or conclude the relationship.* Each mentoring relationship reaches a point where it achieves its defined goals or encounters change. Regardless of the reason for re-evaluation and separation, the mentee and mentor should, if possible, reflect on the relationship and strategize about the transition. There may be

associated emotions of anxiety and loss that arise for the mentee. Communication about this with the mentor allows for the planning of next steps and future mentoring relationships.

**Key point:** As a mentoring relationship changes or ends, the mentee should re-evaluate his/her mentoring needs.

As a mentoring relationship ends, the mentee must return to the self-reflection stage, often fostering the start of a new cycle of mentorship (Figure 1).

Through these five practices, mentees can manage the support and advising they receive throughout their careers. Although each mentor-mentee pair is different, key principles of self-reflection, open communication, and managing up foster productive relationships.

### References

1. Pololi L and Knight S. Mentoring faculty in academic medicine: a new paradigm? *J Gen Intern Med* 2005; 20:866-70.
2. Zerzan JT, Hess R, Schur E, Phillips RS, Rigotti N. Making the most of mentors: a guide for mentees. *Acad Med* 2009; 84(1):140-4.
3. Cozemius A, O'Neill J. The power of SMART goals: using goals to improve student learning. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 2005:13-26.

SGIM

Figure 1. The Mentoring Relationship

