

How To Be a Good Mentee

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Mentoring relationships are the bedrock on which much of higher education is built. Mentoring reflects a relationship between an experienced senior colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague or student (mentee), in which the mentor provides the mentee with resources, expertise, skills, and perspectives related to personal development and career advancement. The mentee is not a passive vessel into which the mentor pours knowledge but rather is a collaborator who actively engages in learning and critically reflects on experiences (Zachary & Fischler, 2009). Mentoring relationships can be formal (the relationship between a professor and student) or informal (the relationship between older and younger students or senior and junior faculty). This article will focus on the formal relationship between faculty mentors and graduate student development.

Every mentoring relationship evolves through the phases of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition (Kram, 1988). In the initiation phase, the foundation for later phases is established, and the interaction between the mentor and mentee at this stage may play a key role in determining the quality and duration of the relationship. During graduate school, the mentor can help the mentee understand formal and informal policies of their institutions, help mentees successfully complete degree requirements, and pass on valuable skills and knowledge. If your relationship with your mentor is healthy throughout graduate school, then the separation and redefinition phases can be beneficial in helping you define your professional self after graduate school. Your mentor can help you navigate post-doc and job applications, interview preparations, and start-up package negotiations, as well as provide guidance in the early stages of your career.

It is clear that healthy mentor/mentee relationships are important. Then the questions follow: How can I be a good mentee? What can I do to make the most of my relationship with my mentor? Mentees who are less knowledgeable about how to maximize the benefits of mentoring relationships receive less mentoring and are less satisfied with their mentoring relationships than are mentees who are better skilled at this task (Allen & Poteet, 1999). Allen and Poteet gathered information about important elements for successful mentor/mentee relationships. This is a summary of what they found:

1. Establish an open communication system with reciprocal feedback
2. Set standards, goals, and expectations
3. Establish trust
4. Care for and enjoy each other
5. Allow mistakes
6. Participate willingly

7. Demonstrate flexibility
8. Consider constraints to mentoring
9. Learn from others
10. Work on common tasks
11. Be open and comfortable

The first three elements are arguably the most important. Establishing open communication is important for the success of any relationship. Being able to be appropriately assertive and to speak about what you need or what is not working for you is important for your own development, and sharing with your mentor what is working and what is going well goes a long way in maintaining a positive relationship. Setting goals and expectations is crucial for the success of the relationship. As early in your relationship as you can, speak with your mentor about what s/he expects from you and what s/he expects to provide you. If those expectations do not line up with your needs, speak candidly about what else you might need.

Scheduling a regular one-on-one meeting time — weekly is great, but during slower times in your academic career, monthly works well — will structure your relationship and will allow you to feel comfortable knowing that you have undivided attention. Without regular meeting times, you may find it harder to make continual progress on goals, and it may be more difficult to complete degree requirements on time.

When you enter into a relationship with a mentor, it is important that you trust the motivation, interest, and ability of your mentor. If you have reservations, you should seek an alternative program or mentor if you are still in the phase of searching for one. If you are already in a less-than-perfect mentoring relationship, you have the option of 1) taking some time to examine yourself and your own behaviors to see how you might improve your relationship, 2) speaking openly and assertively with your mentor about your concerns about the relationship, and/or 3) seeking a new mentor.

Other advice for being a good mentee comes from Triple Creek Associates, a company that specializes in teaching skills to mentees who want to make the most of their mentoring relationships. The foundation of their advice rests on three “vital signs” of successful mentoring relationships: respect, responsiveness, and accountability.

1. Respect: Mutual respect is the starting and sustaining aspect of a successful mentoring relationship. Professional and personal appreciation of one another is core to enhancing learning.
2. Responsiveness: Your willingness to learn from your mentor and your mentor’s willingness to respond to your learning needs are important for successful collaboration.
3. Accountability: Once you and your mentor establish mutually held goals and expectations, keeping your agreements strengthens trust and helps maintain a positive relationship.

Establishing and cultivating a healthy mentoring relationship rests, to a large extent, in the hands of the

mentee. Mentees who know what their own goals and expectations are and can communicate them clearly, who seek information about how to be successful in learning from mentors, and who carefully attend to maintaining a healthy relationship with their mentors may reap many benefits. If you find yourself in a situation where you are not satisfied with the quality of your mentoring relationship, take a critical and honest look at yourself and your behaviors. What might you be able to do to improve your relationship with your mentor? If you are satisfied with the quality of your relationship, take note of what is working. Then, use that knowledge to establish successful mentoring relationships with others in the future.

References

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