

Ways to Make the Most of Peer Mentoring Experiences

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“We don’t accomplish anything in this world alone...and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one’s life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.” -Justice Sandra Day O’Connor

As graduate students, the guidance that we receive from mentors can meaningfully contribute to the tapestry of our career experiences and lives. Although mentors are traditionally thought of as older and in a higher position/rank, mentors are not limited to this category. After all, coworkers and colleagues are frequent sources of support (Allen & Finkelstein, 2003). Peer mentoring, or guidance in a career context from an individual with the same rank but longer tenure than the protégé, can be beneficial for both the mentor and the protégé. We often have opportunities to learn and guide our academic peers — why not get the most out of it?

Why Peer Mentoring?

Peer mentoring can serve two functions: career and psychosocial (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Career functions include sharing helpful information, coaching, and sponsorship for new challenges. For example, a graduate student who has attended a conference before can introduce a newcomer to peers for networking opportunities and give tips on the conference’s highlights. Psychosocial functions are characterized by friendship, emotional support, acceptance and confirmation of each other’s viewpoints. For example, a mentor could empathetically listen to a new student “vent” about the heavy workload involved in graduate school.

The start of graduate school involves a whirlwind of changes. Graduate school continues to bring exciting challenges — writing publications, new assistantships, and accomplishing dissertations. Since these are the kinds of challenges that mentors could be currently experiencing, they can provide “in the moment” advice to their peers. Those who have been protégés tend to have more successful job advancement opportunities than those without mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 2004). If grad students make note of what they learn from their mentors, they can utilize that information to their advantage.

Serving as someone’s mentor can create feelings of engagement, fulfillment, and commitment for the mentor. Sharing information and relating to emotions from past academic experiences can make advanced graduate students feel more connected to their program. Talking about past successes and how they overcame previous challenges can remind them of their capabilities and revitalize them as they face their current challenges and projects. With the clear advantages of peer mentoring established, here are some ways for both protégés and mentors in graduate school to get the most out of the relationship.

Expect the Unexpected

Generally, there is the expectation for mentors to be the high-achieving, shining stars in their organizations. Although it could be helpful for career development to have the guidance of a highly successful mentor, protégés should also consider similarity when working with a mentor. Research shows that protégé-mentor similarity increases the quality and learning outcomes of mentoring relationships (Allen & Eby, 2003). Indeed, achievement and effectiveness are important qualities to look for in fellow graduate students, but without some level of perceived similarity, the relationship will not be as beneficial as it could be. Additionally, if assigned a mentor or protégé by one's graduate program, one should keep an open mind for the potential similarities. Whether taking the same course or a shared love/hatred for the same sports team, similarities are there somewhere. Realizing the similarities that one has with a mentor or protégé will help build a relationship, one in which both can benefit.

It is also important to realize that peer mentoring relationships may be more appropriate and mutually beneficial for psychosocial functions than career-related functions. After all, advanced graduate students may not have their own labs and are still honing their skills, so the career-related resources for protégés may be limited. Protégés should take that into consideration when working with their peer mentors, but this does not mean they should discount the relationships they have with them. Instead, a peer mentor can be helpful for the psychosocial support needed in graduate school. Emotional support may not be as obviously helpful in career success, but emotional support from a peer mentor can equip a protégé for career success.

Create Safety First

Although peer mentoring can be more useful as a source of psychosocial support, truly productive, honest conversations between a protégé and mentor cannot occur without an emotionally safe and secure environment. There are various ways that both sides of the peer mentoring relationship can build trust and convey that candidness is safe and encouraged. Both peers should agree that they are not in competition with or in charge of each other. Peer mentoring is not as effective if either peer has competitive or authoritative motives because it makes it difficult to establish trust.

Clearly agreeing that their conversations are private and should not be repeated to others allows both sides to be honest with each other. Throughout their conversations, both protégés and mentors can continue to convey a safe environment by actively listening to each other's concerns and advice. This includes a protégé not dismissing a mentor's experience or follow-up questions as irrelevant or unnecessary and remembering that they are trying to help. Likewise, peer mentors should be empathetic toward their protégés and encourage their questions. This creates an open, valuable dialogue that both peers can learn from and get the most out of.

Broaden Your Horizons

Like snowflakes, every mentoring relationship is unique, and peer mentoring relationships can serve different purposes. It can be useful to branch out and build mentoring relationships with other peers in your graduate program. For instance, a peer mentor who has worked in the same research lab as the protégé could provide useful information on conducting research on that topic, whereas a peer mentor and protégé who are both from out of state could also relate to each other in a helpful way. Developing a network of purposeful mentoring relationships could make a meaningful difference in one's graduate

school experience.

Summary

Being a part of a peer mentoring relationship can create positive attitudes about graduate school for both mentors and protégés. By creating peer mentoring relationships founded on shared similarity and an emotionally safe environment, graduate students can set the groundwork for continuing a beneficial relationship with the other person. As protégés advance in their graduate program, a positive relationship with their peer mentors may enter a redefinition phase (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Sandura, 1997), wherein the mentoring develops into a friendship or peer relationship where both colleagues can learn from and work with each other.