

## Mentoring Best Practices – Managing Challenges

Whenever people work together, there are bound to be times when the relationships are challenged. Disagreements occur in even the best working relationships.

In healthy situations, the issues are discussed objectively. Each individual is empowered to state his or her position and feel confident that the other is genuinely listening and wanting to understand. Possible solutions are explored with open minds, and the potential effects of the solutions are considered and weighed. It's an easy process to understand, but more often than not it's incredibly difficult to do. People want what they want, believe what they believe, and value what they value. In this section, our goal is to identify some problems that mentors and mentees have encountered and to suggest potential strategies for resolving each problem.

### Common Mentoring Challenges

#### **Providing inadequate direction.**

**Problem:** There are two errors a mentor can make with respect to providing direction. Providing too much help can stall a mentee's movement toward independence and encourage dependence. Providing too little help could leave the mentee to flounder and, again, inhibit progress toward independence.

**Strategy:** While it is important for the mentor to stay vigilant about his or her actions, this is probably a time when the mentee has to step up and take action. It may be useful for the mentee to talk to peers to get a better picture of the extent of direction they are receiving. When the mentee has a good understanding of the situation and is prepared to discuss it with the mentor, the mentee should do so. Assuming that the mentee has a relationship of trust and uses good communication skills, the mentor will be responsive to the mentee's concerns.

#### **Dealing with conflicting demands.**

**Problem:** Individuals at the beginning of their career have a great deal of difficulty saying "no." Junior faculty, fellows, and postdocs with multiple mentors or supervisors sometimes become inundated with demands for work. Since they don't have the experience to know how to prioritize these demands, their workloads can become burdensome and a threat to their career development.

**Strategy:** When different mentors want to make use of your time simultaneously, it is hard to decide how to prioritize the workload. The problem is often made harder because you don't want to disappoint anyone. One way to resolve this dilemma is to take the list of assignments to your mentors individually and ask them to help prioritize your tasks. Better yet, call a team meeting so your mentors can negotiate with one another about the priority of tasks.

#### **Dealing with conflicting advice.**

**Problem:** It is inevitable that mentees with multiple mentors and advisors receive conflicting advice with respect to research or teaching plans, writing manuscripts, and other aspects of their career development. This is worth repeating: it is inevitable. Conflicting advice also inevitably leads to confusion, fear, and other negative emotions and reactions.

**Strategy:** Your mentors are wise and knowledgeable, but they are not infallible. When you get conflicting advice, think about what you want to do. Ask friends for their opinions. Speak to other colleagues. Everyone has been in this situation, so people will be supportive as you work out how to handle it.

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### Mentee seen as lacking commitment.

**Problem:** A mentor may believe that his or her mentee lacks the motivation and commitment to carry out the considerable work required to develop a successful career in academia. This situation is difficult for both the mentor and mentee because the mentee has a real chance of failing and because the mentor may believe that he or she has wasted a great deal of valuable time working with the mentee. At the same time, it is also possible that the mentee believes that the mentor lacks commitment to the mentee's career. The mentee's frustrations and lack of guidance can inhibit his or her movement toward independence. Because of the differential in power between the mentor and mentee, this problem is difficult to resolve while maintaining a productive and amiable relationship.

**Strategy:** If a mentee is viewed as lacking commitment, it is important for the mentor to try to discern the cause. It may be that the mentee-mentor match is not working well, or it may be that the mentee has discovered that his or her career focus is no longer appealing. Individuals who choose academic careers tend to be highly motivated, so while there may be an occasional case in which there is a real lack of commitment, there is usually another issue underlying the problem and it is the mentor's job to identify it and help resolve it.

### Mentor seen as lacking commitment.

**Problem:** A mentee may believe that their mentor lacks commitment to their career. The mentee's frustrations and lack of guidance can inhibit his or her movement toward independence. Because of the differential in power between the mentor and mentee, this problem is difficult to resolve while maintaining a productive and amiable relationship.

**Strategy:** If a mentor is viewed as lacking commitment and is missing meetings and not responding to e-mails, the mentee needs to do something about it. Remembering that individuals who have agreed to be mentors already have a strong commitment to the process, the mentee should raise the issue with the mentor. If it is an especially busy time for the mentor, the mentee can ask if the mentor wants to touch base or have meetings by phone for a few weeks.

### Discovering a mismatch between mentor and mentee.

**Problem:** Unfortunately, a mismatch between a mentor and mentee can occur. The mismatch may result from conflicting personalities, differing career goals or areas of scientific expertise, differences in work ethic, or any number of other reasons. Fortunately, the mismatch is usually discovered early in the relationship by the mentor, the mentee, or both. The longer the mismatch continues, the more difficult it is to resolve.

**Strategy:** While finding a mismatch is regrettable, it is a problem that is relatively simple to correct. If both the mentor and the mentee believe that a switch is desirable, the mentee can work with his or her division chief, department chair, and even the current mentor to help identify a more appropriate mentor.

## Practical Communication Tips for Resolving Conflict

### What are productive methods of addressing conflict or concerns?

The first course of action for the mentor and mentee should always be to talk openly with each other about the issue at hand and to actively listen to what the other person is saying. Preferably, this dialogue will take place face to face.

### What conditions should be in place to allow for effective discussions of difficult issues?

- A feeling of mutual trust and respect.
- Past experience with open and frequent communication between mentee and mentor.
- An understanding that everyone makes mistakes.
- An ability to see each other as individuals.
- An ability to admit that one doesn't know everything.
- An understanding that there may be a completely unrelated issue that is the underlying cause of the problem.
- A willingness to entertain different ways of handling the issue.
- Sensitivity to cultural, gender, and personality differences that may influence perceptions.
- Attention to the development of communication and problem-solving skills.

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### **What steps should be taken to discuss the issue?**

- Identify an appropriate space for discussion.
- Agree to ground rules.
- Specify needs clearly.
- Be flexible in ways of handling the problem.
- Develop a solution that works for both the mentor and the mentee.

### **What methods are not particularly productive?**

Written communication through e-mail, instant messaging, and other electronic means is strongly discouraged when mentees and mentors are trying to resolve a problem. Written communication can easily be misunderstood and lead to an escalation of the issue. Moreover, dashing off an e-mail in anger or frustration does not allow individuals the time they need to cool down and think through the situation.

### **What should be done if the issue has not been resolved?**

One way to proceed is through mediation, which involves bringing the issue to another party to help resolve the dispute. This is a well-accepted method for resolving problems, and taking advantage of this method should not be viewed as weakness on anyone's part. Sometimes, another set of eyes and ears is needed to make headway. This tends to be a more formal process.

### **Who should be the mediator?**

The mediator should be an objective, neutral, third party whose judgment both the mentor and the mentee respect and trust. Although the third party may be a colleague, advisor, or peer, it is recommended that the selected mediator be senior to both the mentee and the mentor and have administrative or supervisory oversight of both of them, as is usually the case with a department chair or division chief.

### **Once the issue has been resolved, is there a way to learn from it?**

A useful tool for taking something positive from a difficult experience is reflection. Reflection is the act of thinking carefully and intently about what happened, how it made the participants feel, if there was a way to avoid the situation altogether, and if there is a better way to have handled it.

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