

## Mentoring 101: Building a Mentoring Relationship

In today's economy, employers are looking to maximize efficiency and employees are doing everything they can to demonstrate their value. These complementary interests create the fertile ground from which successful mentoring, whether an organizational program or an individual relationship, can grow. Those individuals who take greater personal responsibility for their career development are the most likely to benefit from the guidance of a mentor, and organizations looking to identify and retain their most valuable contributors stand to gain by providing the opportunity for mentoring relationships to flourish. In a field as diverse as dietetics, finding a mentor who understands your particular professional interests and career goals could be the key ingredient in your career advancement. But before you can go about finding a mentor, it's essential to understand exactly what a mentor does, and how both mentor and mentee can contribute to a successful mentoring relationship.

### WHAT MAKES A GOOD MENTOR?

Very simply, a mentor provides guidance and counsel to someone who has less experience in a field. Relationships can be spontaneous and informal, or strict and structured (1). A supervisor at an office who takes an interest in a younger worker's upward mobility, a teacher taking extra time to help a student, or a family member who provides extra support to a relative are all possible mentoring relationships (1). In dietetics, a mentor is likely to be a senior colleague or leader in your area of research or practice. Teresa Bush-Zurn, MA, RD, FADA, dietetic internship

director for the VA San Diego Healthcare System and a former member of the American Dietetic Association's (ADA) Member Value Committee, says, "It helps to be able to talk to someone in your own field, especially in relation to specialties. A mentor can help a mentee by guiding them in the right direction or giving them another perspective to an idea they had not thought of. I know I found my own mentor when I began my career as a dietetic internship director. I called her a lot. There is no class you can take to do this job; that's true for many specialties in our profession."

A good mentor can increase a mentee's chances for success by helping the mentee set and attain goals, introducing him or her to career advancement opportunities, expanding the mentee's professional network, and bolstering his or her confidence (2). But what qualities make a good mentor? Professor David Megginson of Sheffield Hallam University in England says the fundamental responsibility of a good mentor is to help the mentee make sense of his or her own experiences. "It's not helpful simply to tell somebody what to do," says Megginson. "What a skilled mentor is trying to do is help the person become more self-sufficient, not more reliant on the mentor" (3). In order to do so, a mentor must take a personal interest in the mentoring relationship, bringing a positive attitude and an enthusiasm for ongoing learning and growth in the field he or she shares with the mentee. While it is important to share skills, knowledge, and expertise and offer constructive feedback directly, it is equally essential that the mentor serve as a role model by setting and meeting his or her own professional goals, valuing the opinions of others, and earning the respect of his or her peers (4).

In *The Helping Hand*, the California Dietetic Association's guide for dietetic mentoring programs, several critical skills for successful mentors are identified:

- Active listening
- Identifying goals with respect to current reality
- Building trust
- Encouraging and inspiring
- Providing corrective feedback
- Managing risks
- Opening doors
- Instructing and developing capabilities
- Knowing oneself.

*The Helping Hand* also identifies the primary responsibility of a mentor as assisting mentees in developing their potential on both a personal and professional level, which "can be achieved by working to modify their perceptions, thinking, and behavior. One of the greatest gifts a mentor can give to a mentee is an invitation to meet change as a friend. This invitation calls on the mentor to act as model, counselor, confidante, teacher, advocate, and advisor" (2).

### THE ROLE OF THE MENTEE

Certainly a good mentor is critical to a mentee's success, but the mentoring relationship is far more collaborative than didactic, so the mentee must enter into it with a firm grasp of his or her own role and responsibilities. The most basic responsibility of the mentee is choosing his or her mentor. Even in a formal mentoring program in which mentors and mentees are matched by a third party or a computerized matching system, it is first up to the mentee to determine which qualities he or she most values in a mentor. Establishing your goals for the relationship, determining how a mentor can best help you, and outlining what you want to learn is another key step in identifying the type of person with whom you'll work best. While some people place a greater value on developing a friendly, easy-going relationship, others may make specific knowledge or technical skills a higher priority (5).

Once the relationship begins, the mentee should be the proactive part-

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ner, taking on the responsibility of contacting the mentor, making appointments, and communicating his or her goals to the mentor—“the more self-reliant the mentee, the greater the success of the partnership” (2). It is also important for the mentee to make the mentor feel comfortable in offering the sort of constructive criticism that makes the relationship valuable. If your mentor doesn’t know you very well, he or she may be hesitant to offer advice for fear of hurting your feelings. Take the lead by asking for the mentor’s input on specific areas for improvement, and be sure to really listen to what your mentor has to say. Advice that may seem less relevant at the moment it is given often becomes pertinent in the future, and feedback to which you might initially react negatively can prove valuable on further reflection (6).

The most important skill for a mentee to possess is the ability to learn quickly. Linda Phillips-Jones, PhD, author of *The Mentoring Program Coordinator’s Guide*, recommends observing both your mentor and others and learning from their actions, studying materials related to your development area, and reporting to your mentor on your success in applying the knowledge and skills he or she has presented to you (2). By keeping the mentor current on goals reached and those that still remain, the mentee takes a leadership role in the management of the relationship and establishes the criteria that will be used to decide when it should come to an end.

### THE MENTORING PROCESS

Because each person’s experience, personality, and professional development goals are different, every mentoring relationship is unique (6). However, there are some basic elements that are common to the process no matter who is involved. One of the most important is the first meeting between mentor and mentee, which can set the tone for the entire relationship to follow. In this first meeting, both parties should take the time to get to know each other, share information about their backgrounds, and establish a foundation of trust. Simply becoming acquainted and developing a rapport is a critical first step toward a successful mentoring rela-

**MENTORING EVALUATION FORM**

Mentor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mentee's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of initiation: \_\_\_\_\_ Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions about your mentoring relationship:

1. What are your goals for this mentoring relationship?
2. How are you working to achieve these goals?
3. What objectives have been accomplished up to this point?
4. What is/are the current objective(s)?
5. What objectives remain to be addressed in future meetings?
6. What has been your greatest challenge up to this point?
7. What outside resources are needed to achieve your remaining objectives?
8. How would you describe your mentoring relationship? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
9. What, if anything, would you change about your mentoring relationship?
10. What has been your most valuable learning experience up to this point?

**Figure.** Mentoring evaluation form.

relationship. While they are getting to know each other, both the mentor and mentee should discuss their goals and sketch out a framework for future interactions that ensures both are actively involved in and engaged by the mentoring process (7).

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“A poorly planned and unstructured mentoring relationship can be a waste of time” (7), so the next steps in the process include specifically defining the roles for both mentor and mentee, agreeing on a meeting schedule and format, and clarifying any communication preferences or limita-

tions (7,8). First, both parties should agree on a regular meeting schedule and structure. Meeting more frequently at the beginning of the relationship can help to build momentum toward the mentee’s goals, while also serving as a trial period to determine whether the relationship is on the right track. Establishing a specific time frame for these initial meetings after which it will be decided whether to end or continue the relationship can help minimize any misunderstandings or acrimony associated with either individual choosing to part company (6,7). In addition to setting the meeting schedule, the parameters of the individual meetings themselves should be determined. One recommended structure includes “a social opening, followed by agenda negotiation, goal setting, discussion of two to three topics, and a closing, including a summary and plans for the next 2 to 4 weeks,”

but meetings can be as formal or informal as the participants wish, as long as they are effective (8). At this point, the pair should also establish the mentor’s availability outside of meetings and determine each person’s preferred mode of communication (eg, face-to-face, by phone, via e-mail) (7,8).

With the logistical details taken care of, the mentoring partners are ready to discuss the mentee’s goals and how to achieve them, and to develop “concrete measures of progress and success” (8). Once goals are set, specific development objectives on the path toward reaching those goals can be defined, and activities selected to achieve the objectives (7). *The Helping Hand* provides mentors with several suggested activities:

- Have the mentee “shadow” or observe the mentor or another professional
- Talk about what it takes to get ahead, generally and in specific terms
- Talk about personal values, especially as they dictate or influence behavior and decision making
- Talk about the value of networking and introduce the mentee to people who can help him or her
- Locate appropriate courses, seminars, or professional meetings; select and jointly attend
- Suggest or provide relevant reading material
- Check in between meetings via telephone or e-mail
- Arrange for meetings with other mentors and mentees (2).

It is also recommended that both mentor and mentee keep a record of the mentee’s activities and progress. At each meeting, the mentee should provide the mentor with an update on his or her progress since the last meeting, ask any questions he or she may have about how to complete an objective, and find out what needs to be accomplished before the next meeting (2,9).

This process of setting objectives and measuring progress toward the mentee’s overall development goals will be the dominant mode of interaction for most of the mentoring relationship, but how long should this process last? There is no definitive

answer to this question because it is different for every mentoring partnership. Both the ability of the mentee and the frequency of meetings influence how quickly development goals may be achieved. Kathy E. Kram, PhD, author of *Mentoring at Work: Developing Relationships in Organizational Life*, suggests a range of 1 to 2 years as “long enough for some meaningful coaching, but not so long that individuals are reluctant to commit” (10). One way to gauge the progress of the mentoring relationship is by periodically using an evaluation form (Figure). This can be a valuable tool for coming to a mutual understanding of the mentoring relationship’s strengths and weaknesses. It also helps to keep track of achievements and objectives and tracks progress toward the mentee’s ultimate goals.

No matter how long it may take, as the relationship progresses and the mentee nears completion of his or her goals, the time will come to contemplate bringing the mentoring partnership to an end. Even if the relationship continues to be fulfilling to both partners, changes in the mentee’s career path may necessitate a change in mentor, especially if a different area of expertise is needed (9). At this point, it is best to schedule a formal ending of the relationship, rather than letting it continue indefinitely until it loses its value due to lack of focus or withers from inactivity. An official final meeting allows the mentee to reflect on his or her goals, celebrate accomplishments, and plan for the future. It also provides a sense of closure for both partners and eases the transition into a less formal relationship (7).

### THE BENEFITS OF MENTORING

At the end of a successful mentoring relationship, everyone involved has benefitted from the partnership. Most obviously, the mentee has developed professional skills, increased confidence, and expanded his or her professional network. The mentor also stands to gain from the relationship, both personally and professionally. Mentors have reported that they find the experience of helping guide a colleague’s career rewarding, that receiving positive feedback from mentees is meaningful, and that working

with an enthusiastic mentee can inspire them to greater heights in their own work (11,12). Mentors can also learn from their mentees and enhance their professional standing by demonstrating their influence and cultivating outstanding contributors to their organization and profession (13). Finally, organizations that encourage mentoring reap its rewards by increasing both employee performance and loyalty (14). For associations like the American Dietetic Association, members who have been mentored are more likely to become active participants in the association and future leaders of the profession (13).

In next month’s *Journal*, we’ll conclude our series on mentoring with an exploration of how technology has exponentially increased the mentoring opportunities available to both mentors and mentees and take an in-depth look at the costs and benefits of both traditional and electronic mentoring.

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