

Mentoring Matters

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Mentoring is an ancient concept that has current relevance to radiology residents. Indeed, ever since Mentor educated and provided guidance for Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, mentoring has positively influenced career development and advancement in many professions, including medicine [1]. Although mentoring has been a long-standing integral component in business and military organizations, radiology residency programs have only recently begun to formally incorporate mentoring as a way to enhance career guidance, job satisfaction, and personal development [2, 3]. In this article, we review the importance of mentoring programs in radiology residency training, describe how to select a mentor, and discuss how to foster a successful mentoring relationship.

A recent survey of radiology program directors affirmed that mentoring relationships represent critical resources for resident professional development and career advancement [3]. In addition, active participation in mentoring programs during residency training has been linked to increased research productivity, enhanced career satisfaction, and eventual pursuit of an academic career [3, 4]. Fortunately, over the past few years, more residency programs have begun to offer formal mentoring programs [3, 4]. For example, of the 70 program directors who responded to a recent survey, nearly 60% offer a mentoring program, most of which were established just in the past five years [3]. Half of the surveyed programs formally assign residents to a mentor, whereas the others encourage self-selection. It has been suggested that self-selection is associated with slightly more overall satisfaction than assigned mentor relationships, possibly because of ensuring that the “right chemistry” exists from the start [4]. However, such chemistry can also develop over time in assigned mentoring relationships.

Selecting a mentor can be a challenging and sometimes fearful task for residents, especially in the absence of a formal mentoring program. In such cases, residents may find it helpful to start the process of finding a mentor by first meeting with their program directors or other faculty members that they already know to discuss what type of guidance and support they need and to obtain recommendations of potential mentors who may be a good fit for them [5].

Becoming a Mentor

The ideal mentor should have professional and life experiences that provide perspective when guiding a mentee with career and personal decisions, be willing to develop a mentee's professional career through identifying professional opportunities and networking, and be available to provide critical feedback on the mentee's scholarship and decisions in a respectful manner (Table 1). Mentors must have time to devote to fostering the relationship and hence not be overcommitted. Mentors should understand what skills they possess and their motivation to become mentors as well as be able to assess whether they can offer the necessary support for potential mentees. Mentors should actively seek feedback from the mentee to determine what is working in the relationship and what unmet needs still remain to be addressed.

Seeking a Mentor

When seeking a mentor (Table 2), mentees must understand their specific needs and seek mentors with these desired qualities and attributes. They also should be open to having multiple mentors to meet these needs. In addition, having mentors outside of radiology or radiation oncology, or even outside of medicine, may sometimes provide alternative perspectives that may be beneficial. Toward this end, the concept of “multiple mentors” has recently

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TABLE 1: Questions to Ask Before Becoming a Mentor

1. What is your motivation for becoming a mentor?
2. What are your major professional or personal accomplishments?
3. What skills can you offer to potential mentees?
4. Do you have time to be a good mentor?
5. Are you approachable?
6. Can you create a confidential and safe mentoring environment?
7. Are you able to provide constructive feedback?

TABLE 2: Questions a Mentee Should Ask Before Seeking a Mentor

1. What are your personal and professional accomplishments to date?
2. What challenges are you currently facing, and what specific goals do you have?
3. To meet those goals, what specific qualities are you seeking in a mentor?
4. In your current environment, can you identify any potential mentors?
5. Do you have time to commit to maintaining the mentor-mentee relationship?
6. Are you open to constructive feedback?

TABLE 3: Steps to Maintaining a Successful Mentor-Mentee Relationship

1. Establish specific goals for both mentee and mentor.
2. Establish ground rules for accountability, confidentiality, and boundaries up-front.
3. Create a workable plan with timelines to accomplish both short-term and long-term goals.
4. Set aside time to meet at regular intervals to assess progress and provide feedback.
5. Be open to criticism, be respectful, and listen attentively to each other.
6. Regularly reflect on the relationship with regard to what is working or not working and what challenges remain to be addressed.

become popular because it is rare to identify a single individual who meets all the needs of a particular mentee [5]. Within this context, it has been suggested that mentees may benefit from developing complementary mentoring relationships with both junior and senior faculty members. Whereas junior faculty mentors may have more time and are closer to a resident's career stage, senior faculty members often have more experience in networking and in offering long-term career advice [5].

Maintaining a Mentor-Mentee Relationship

Once a mentoring relationship is established, both the mentor and mentee are responsible for creating and maintaining successful and productive interactions [6] (Table 3). Both the mentor and mentee have a commitment to each other to grow and develop the relationship over time. Establishing

explicit realistic short-term and long-term goals and expectations is crucial. Depending on the goals of the mentee, the mentor may focus primarily on academic endeavors or may provide guidance on how best to balance the demands of career and family. For each relationship, having specific learning outcomes, defining a process by which to accomplish these goals, and defining appropriate boundaries are critical steps to ensuring success. For example, deciding how often, by what means to communicate, and by what methods to ensure confidentiality should be established up front. However, developing common goals and revisiting these expectations at regular intervals maximizes the chance that the relationship will be long lasting and readily adapt to the changing needs of the mentee. Creating a safe environment whereby an exchange of ideas can occur, curiosity is fostered, and listening is empha-

sized provides the mentor and mentee with the ability to embrace generational and cultural differences and to create a respectful camaraderie. Often, reflection by the mentor and mentee on their interactions can provide insight into what works and what has yet to be addressed satisfactorily.

Finally, most mentor-mentee relationships do not last forever because the mentee accomplishes the set goals leading to independence. Although the mentor and mentee may remain in communication, their relationship typically evolves over time into one of friendship and mutual respect as colleagues. At this point, the mentee graduates into the role of mentor and now can pass along expertise and guidance to younger trainees.

Conclusion

As mentoring programs continue to increase, more residents will likely benefit from the expertise and wisdom of more experienced faculty to guide them through difficult career decisions and personal choices. Considering the benefits of mentoring, residents should seek faculty mentors even in the absence of a formal mentoring program. Establishing and maintaining healthy mentor-mentee relationships has the potential to result in greater work satisfaction for future generations of radiologists as well as fostering the development of productive and successful leaders in our field.

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