



DERMATOLOGIC DISQUISITIONS AND OTHER ESSAYS

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Strategic mentoring: Growth for mentor and mentee



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Abstract Mentoring is enriching for both the mentor and mentee, but often getting started can be a primary obstacle to this useful tool. This contribution focuses on how to embark on a mentoring relationship with a junior colleague. In addition to describing various approaches to being a mentor, it outlines unproductive traps to avoid, steps to establishing a successful mentoring relationship, including conversation starters, and professional skills one can continue to develop to improve mentoring outcomes.

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Besides the formal pedagogy of residency and self-selecting role models, there lies an essential third way of preparing physicians to fulfill their leadership roles in medicine: mentoring. What began as a popular business management concept in the early 1980s has now become a recognized way for experienced physicians to help develop younger colleagues while benefitting themselves from the increased connections across generational lines. Despite the benefits to both mentor and mentee, there is still a great deal of confusion on how to embark on and sustain an effective mentoring relationship. A 2009 Cleveland Clinic study identified that although emotional support and psychologic encouragement were the most valued components of a mentorship, the most effective mentoring relationships were those that had a specific, agreed-upon goal—what they termed “strategic mentoring.”¹

The American Academy of Dermatology defines a mentor as “a guide, tutor, facilitator, counselor and a trusted adviser. He or she is someone who is willing to spend his or her time

and expertise to guide the development of another person.”² Unlike a professional coach, a mentor is not paid for his or her services. The mentor is also usually not in the mentee’s direct chain of command within the workplace. A mentee is someone who chooses to be counseled, guided, and advised.

Start the way you intend to finish

Veteran physicians will benefit from taking the time to determine exactly what sort of style of mentoring best fits their availability, personality, and talents. The following is a list of common roles of mentorship. Most mentors will see themselves as a mixture of these various styles:

Advisor: The mentor offers advice based on experience.

Sponsor: The mentor opens doors to formal and informal societies that would otherwise be closed.

Coach: The mentor teaches and provides feedback while encouraging new ways of thinking, acting, and pushing the mentee to stretch his or her capabilities.

Goal Focuser: This includes helping the protégé create both short- and long-term goals and the plan to accomplish them.

Confidant: Mentor and mentee share a confidential relationship, where the mentee is safe to share inner thoughts and feelings without fear of ridicule, gossip, or other negative outcomes.

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Promoter: The mentor steers the mentee into assignments that make him or her known to superiors.

Role Model: The mentor demonstrates the kinds of behaviors, attitudes, and values that lead to success.

Affirmer: The mentor supports the mentee and shows respect and personal caring that goes beyond business requirements.³

In addition to determining the style of mentorship that is most suitable, the mentor must have the time to be an effective mentor. It is helpful to integrate it as a part of one's professional efforts rather than an add-on extra after work is completed. The mentoring relationship can get off to a good start by clearly defining schedules and preferred methods of communication. Some mentors engage in continuous informal contact like e-mail and phone calls, whereas others prefer scheduled face-to-face monthly or quarterly encounters. The mentor should be willing to orchestrate developmental experiences and give actionable advice and feedback while refraining from intervening or solving issues for the mentee. Most importantly, the mentor should help set specific and focused goals. This will help both parties clearly recognize when a mentorship has come to its end. Although most mentors and mentees will segue into a professional friendship, it is neither desirable nor advisable for the mentoring relationship to continue indefinitely.

In the beginning, the mentee likewise must designate the time to be in a mentoring relationship and be direct in knowing and communicating his or her wants and needs. Key responsibilities should be defined and discussed. How should the mentee prepare for meetings with the mentor? Who is responsible for scheduling meetings? The mentee should be willing to be reflective, experiment, offer feedback about what is or isn't working. The mentee must always maintain a spirit of gratitude and collegiality.

Before beginning, it is also helpful to review the five classic mentoring traps that can derail progress or even sabotage a relationship before it starts.^{3,4}

1. Saying "yes" to mentorship but never clarifying what that will entail or scheduling the time for regular interaction and discussion. As a potential mentor, be clear and up front about availability and expectations.
2. Feeling like there is little or no connection or chemistry with one another. Take the time to have at least one in-depth conversation before committing to a mentoring role. If chemistry doesn't develop, you may want to suggest another more suitable mentor.
3. Allowing the mentee to become overly dependent for advice. A good mentor may guide the mentee through decision making but does not require consultation approval for actions taken by the mentee.
4. Having great conversations but never coming to a conclusion or actionable result. This is common when there is great chemistry in the mentoring relationship but a lack of shared goals.

5. The mentor feeling he or she is working harder than the mentee to advance his or her career. When possible, the mentee should be responsible for scheduling meetings, following up, and reporting back to the mentor on progress.

Step-by-step: The mentoring ladder for success

Once you have agreed to undertake a mentoring role, how do you get started? To stay focused on a strategic mentoring approach, it is helpful to have a prepared outline or set of open-ended questions to refer to in early meetings.

Start by establishing the relationship. Ask open-ended questions like, How's it going? What do you do when you are not at work? Why did you choose dermatology? If the mentee is already familiar to you, this would be a good time to model how the mentoring relationship may differ slightly from the one you previously shared.

Once a connection is made, the next step is to clarify expectations for both parties of the mentoring dyad. Some questions might include: Have you ever worked with a mentor before? What worked or didn't work with that relationship? What will make this a meaningful relationship for you? What do you need most from me?

Although it is good to be clear and direct, make sure you each talk about your own hopes and expectations to avoid slipping into an overly submissive dynamic on the part of the mentee. A good conversation opener to ensure that balance is, Let's talk through mutual expectations in some key areas like confidentiality and when and where we meet.

After this groundwork has been laid, you are ready to head into the understanding and assessing phase of mentoring. Here, it is most important to be an active listener and temporarily set aside temptation to advise prematurely. Again, open-ended questions are extremely helpful here such as, How are things going in general on a scale of one to 10? What drives you at your core or motivates you more than anything? What are your short-term and long-term career goals? What bores you?

At this point in the mentoring relationship, you are ready to start to explore pathways and possibilities as well as focus in on concrete goals. Some conversation starters for this step are, If you had no fear, what would you do? What options and choices do you think you have? Which option best fits your goals? In your heart, what do you want to do?

Finally, and most importantly, the mentor can help elicit a commitment to action on the part of the mentee. This is the crux of what mentoring is all about. Encouragement is good but accountability is one of the best gifts a mentor can give a mentee. At the same time, you want to avoid any perception that these are *your* goals or that the mentee's success is more important to you than it is to them. Words that convey this balance include: What critical milestones do you see along the way? What is standing in your way? What's the first step you can take? When will you start?³

Throughout the course of a mentoring relationship, you may cycle through these five phases (relationship building, clarifying expectations, assessing, exploring, and acting) many times. This is fine as long as progress continues toward the goals you and your mentee have set forth.

Key mentoring skills

As you continue in your mentoring relationship, it is helpful to use this as an opportunity to develop and improve your skills as well. First and foremost, active listening is an essential skill to being a good mentor. This means truly listening with the intent to understand the other person's perspective rather than listening with the intent of formulating one's own response. People who are skilled at active listening have a sense of curiosity and wonder, use active listening techniques to play back what the other person has said, and be sure they truly absorb the emotion, meaning, and intent that the other person is trying to convey. When one person feels understood by the other—even if they don't fully agree with one another's perspective—it creates a sense of appreciation and empowerment and builds the mentoring relationship. The fundamentals of active listening include posture, tone, approach, open-ended questions, clarification through questions, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, summarizing, and using questions to probe deeper.³

Giving honest and effective feedback is perhaps one of the greatest challenges to mentoring even when the feedback is positive in nature.⁵ At the same time, it is a valuable feedback loop from which the mentee can learn from mistakes as well as successes. To give effective feedback a technique that can be helpful is using a pattern of situation-behavior-impact. State the situation to anchor feedback to a particular time and space. This helps the mentee understand the context. For example, *"When you presented your research paper at the state dermatologic society meeting last Saturday..."*

Behavior allows the person receiving the feedback to know specifically how he or she behaves. Behaviors are things or actions that can be recorded, visually or aurally. For example, *"You spoke clearly and concisely. Your presentation was well organized and easy to follow. You answered the questions directly..."*

Impact is thoughts, feelings, and actions we take as a result of people's behaviors. Identifiable impacts can be emotional, task oriented, or shared by a group. For example, *"Consequently the society approved your membership. I was proud of you."*

Effective feedback makes information useful to others; allows one to replicate, alter, or improve performance; is developmental in nature; is direct; is behaviorally anchored; and does not place the person in a defensive position.

Inspiring a mentee necessitates an understanding of others' internal motivators. Offer ideas that spark the mentee's enthusiasm and energy. One way of inspiring is to suggest

stretching. Stretching places others in potentially uncomfortable but growthful situations. Identify opportunities for learning and expansion of skills but be careful to only prompt stretching once a strong relationship has been established.

Coaching provides direction, guidance, and suggestions to help others solve problems. It is supplemented by applying one's own knowledge and experience. Be careful not to offer advice when asking the right question would serve the mentee better.

Finally, as a mentor there will be times that using your own connections may help your mentee reach his or her goals. You may promote your mentee to a group, enterprise, or committee when opportunities arise to demonstrate skills. Formulate clear, succinct ways of talking about your mentee's attributes and where he or she is headed in his or her career. Other times, it may be best to offer less direct guidance by suggesting experts and models other than yourself to provide tangible concrete examples of exemplary work for others to emulate.

Mentoring: Why do it?

Physicians who have had mentors report having greater career satisfaction and believe that the relationship has positively affected their job satisfaction and promotions in their field.^{6,7} Mentoring can provide confidence, improvement of skills, innovative thinking, positive risk taking, and greater connection to the broader medical community. For those who offer their time as mentors, there can be a sense of enhanced connection with and understanding of the next generation of physicians, the challenges they face, and the future of medicine as a whole. Long after the mentorship has ended, the experience and the relationships of trust developed will continue to be bear fruit for the mentor, the mentee, and dermatology as a whole.

For more information about mentoring, including opportunities to volunteer as a mentor or select a mentor, the American Academy of Dermatology has a formal website on mentoring at <http://www.aad.org/member-tools-and-benefits/leadership-institute/mentoring/mentoring-and-career-development>.

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Autobiographical Sketch

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