

Do you have what it takes to be a mentor or be mentored?

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Abstract

A skilled mentor can positively impact a mentee's personal and professional development. A successful mentor-mentee relationship is contingent on mentor and mentee attributes, trust, and respect, and fit based on shared values and working style. To be mutually beneficial to both mentor and mentee, open communication with defined goals and expectations should be established. This relationship should be nurtured and revisited with the potential to evolve over the span of their careers.

The required knowledge, skills, and behaviours of a professional medical writer have been thoroughly described in the Core Competency Model.^{1,2} While a mentor can use this model to guide medical writers in training, and setting goals for skills and career development, the relationship between mentor and mentee can extend beyond medical writing competencies. The mentor is a role model that can provide psychological and emotional support, career, and skills guidance, and can advocate for their mentees by recognising their achievements publicly.³ A mentoring relationship is a sum of its parts, requiring specific attributes of the mentor and mentee to be successful. Characteristics required for an effective mentor-mentee relationship, and the way this mutually beneficial relationship can be fostered, are described.

Characteristics of an effective mentor

The mentor should be a confident professional with interpersonal, organisational, and communication skills. The mentor should advise, guide, support, direct, challenge, encourage, and motivate, and have adequate time to dedicate to the mentor-mentee relationship. To accomplish these tasks, the mentor should engage the mentee in reflective learning leading to change. The following are suggested competencies of a mentor:⁴

1. **Interest in developing others:** Effective mentors are altruistic individuals that have an interest in achieving through others and helping others recognise and achieve their potential.
2. **Managing emotions:** Mentoring requires a high level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness to recognise and manage the mentor's own behaviour within the mentor-mentee relationship.
3. **Behavioural awareness:** Mentors must have observational and reflective skills to provide insight into behaviour patterns of individuals and their interactions with working groups.
4. **Listening and congruence:** Mentors should be attuned to what the mentee is hearing and understanding through listening, observing non-verbal signals, and adapting tone, voice, volume, pace, and language accordingly. This requires that mentors are genuine, and can share feelings, attitudes, and opinions in a way that takes ownership (for example, "I think", "I feel", ...).
5. **Communication skills:** Questions should be framed and discussed to empower the mentee to find possible answers (i.e., learn and develop). Summarising key thoughts and discussing them can provide clarity to a host of key issues.
6. **Feedback:** Mentors should provide honest feedback in a way that the mentee can process, understand, and apply it.
7. **Challenge and confrontation:** Mentors should raise consciousness in the mentee about any restriction or avoidance that blocks, distorts, or restricts learning through an appropriate challenge that raises the



The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.

Benjamin Disraeli

mentees' awareness and help them reframe the situation.

8. **Sense of proportion/good humour:** Mentors should feel comfortable with themselves and their role within an organisation. Humour and laughter can help build relationships, ease tension, and help the mentee develop multiple perspectives.
9. **Goal clarity:** Mentors should be able to identify strengths and limitations in their mentees' development and support mentees in identifying and setting clear achievable goals.
10. **Business and/or professional savvy:** Mentors must be able to reflect critically on their own experience to develop judgement, which they can share with the mentees to address mentee issues. Mentors should be able to navigate the mentee through difficult situations, warn their mentees of potential pitfalls, and protect them from harsh interactions.



Finding a mentor

An established mentoring programme may or may not exist in the workplace, and as such, the prospective mentee may need to identify a mentor and cultivate this relationship.

Before selecting a mentor, the mentees should clarify their needs, and define what they anticipate from the relationship (e.g., personal, professional, or other skills development).⁵ Prospective mentees should also define whether they have personal preferences in a mentor (e.g., age, race, gender, personality, emotional needs, or teaching style). Mentees should set short- and long-term goals for the mentoring relationship. Mentees should be able to conduct informational interviews with potential mentors to determine if their professional experience, skills, interests, network, work style, and values are a fit for the mentee's needs. Similarly, an analogous assess-

ment by the mentor of the prospective mentee to determine the success of the potential relationship is indispensable. During these interviews, the groundwork for the future relationship is laid.

Characteristics of an effective mentee

Once a mentor has agreed to support the mentee, the mentee should own the responsibility for establishing a communication framework. This can include scheduling meetings and their frequency, raising issues for discussion, establishing timelines for achieving goals, managing their own expectations and the mentor's expectations of the relationship, willingness to challenge and be challenged, and being open minded. Many of the competencies of the mentor and mentee are similar, and include:^{4,6}

From all my teachers have I learned and from my students more than all.

Rabbi Akiva

1. **Intelligence:** Mentees should be able to identify and solve problems.
2. **Ambition and enthusiasm:** Mentees should be capable and ambitious, strive for career progression, and be actively willing to seek challenges.
3. **Strong interpersonal skills:** Mentees must be able to demonstrate network ability.
4. **Feedback:** Mentees should be open to receiving feedback and be active listeners.
5. **Respectful:** Mentees should be respectful of their mentor's competing responsibilities when scheduling meetings or requesting assistance.

As the relationship develops, the mentee should reflect on the process, identify and resolve pain points, be responsible for their own development, and welcome change. The mentee should demonstrate appreciation for the mentor's commitment to the relationship.

Characteristics of a successful mentoring relationship

A successful mentoring relationship includes the following characteristics:⁶

1. **Reciprocity:** Rewarding for mentor and mentee.
2. **Mutual respect:** Respect for the mentor and the mentee's time, effort, and qualifications.
3. **Clear expectations:** Expectations of the relationship are outlined and revisited over time. Both the mentor and mentee are held accountable to these expectations.
4. **Personal connection:** Mentor and mentee should be able to connect on a personal level and have a similar approach towards working and solving problems.
5. **Shared values:** Mentors and mentees have a shared approach to work and personal life.

The evolution of a mentoring relationship

The mentoring relationship is dynamic, as the mentee transitions from one career stage to another, and the mentor and mentee may become colleagues. An experienced mentor will have the experience and network of colleagues to support mentee development through these transitions. The mentee should collaborate with the mentor in setting long-term career development goals and ensure that the mentee is receiving adequate support to achieve these goals. The mentor can also provide perspective on an appropriate work-life balance during life's transitions.

Finally, while face to face meetings between mentor and mentee are preferable, in the remote work environment and under restrictions imposed during the current COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing communication using video conferencing software can help facilitate communication.

Conclusions

A successful mentor-mentee relationship can be mutually beneficial to both the mentee and mentor. A supportive mentor can nurture the mentee's personal and professional development. The mentor, in turns, gains through professional stimulation, personal enrichment, satisfaction, and giving back to their profession.

So are you ready to be a mentor or be mentored?

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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