

Mentor vs. line manager: Differences and similarities

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Abstract

A good mentor may be a good line manager in a business setting and vice versa, but there are some key differences: mentors are more skill-oriented, while line managers are more goal-oriented. People who are both good line managers and mentors are especially valuable for an entry-level employee, but balancing the roles can be difficult, so it may be best to keep them separate. To most benefit from the line manager-direct report relationship, a medical writer should have clear career development goals and help manage their line manager's expectations. To benefit from the mentor-mentee relationship, a medical writer should communicate effectively about their knowledge gaps and concerns.

Mentors vs. line managers

A mentor is someone who "practises the activity of giving a younger or less experienced person



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help and advice over some time, especially at work or school",¹ or in the words of Homer, "a wise and trusted counsellor."² A line manager

is someone who is "directly responsible for managing the work of someone else in a company or business, and who is one level above that person."³

The key qualities of a good mentor and line manager differ (Table 1). Mentors may work for different organisations than the mentee and are more skill-oriented, whereas line managers are more goal- and business-oriented. The objective of mentors is to encourage the long-term development of their mentees; they will pay attention to skills their mentee acquires and will be rewarded by knowing that their mentee has improved as a professional. Mentors, for example, will teach a writer to produce a particular type of document or independently lead a project that requires close collaboration with experts from other disciplines such as statisticians or clinical research physicians.

By contrast, line managers focus more on tangible short-term achievements of their direct report because they need to ensure that the

Table 1. Key qualities of good mentors vs. good line managers

Mentor	Line manager
Truly cares for the mentee's personal growth	Ensures projects are completed on time; therefore, business goals can be achieved
Selflessness – unconditional sharing of their knowledge of the industry and related skills	Hires appropriate employees best fit for the job description
Focuses on providing sustainable solutions to problems	Helps align the company/team goals with personal goals of the employee, so they can best perform
Honestly and patiently points out problems of a mentee's work	Capable of motivating employees
Helps with building industry connections	Provides business support when required

Table 2. What a medical writer can say to a mentor vs. a line manager

Things more appropriately said to a mentor than to a line manager	Things more appropriately said to a line manager than to a mentor
I will not be able to do this; this is not something I am good at.	Can you please find additional resources for me to complete this task?
I cannot finish this project on time because I do not know how to do [task].	I can adapt to our team goal.
I have experienced difficulties. (Expressed at the last minute of project deadline).	I have learned enough that I am fully capable of doing [task].
I don't want to do this because I'm not interested in this project at all.	I will make sure this task is completed on time.

employee is productive and contributing to the overall business goals. Line managers will also pay more attention to existing skills a new direct report can bring to the table. Further, line managers are team leaders and are not only responsible for individuals but also for the full team and its business goals, which is why one characteristic of a good line manager is that they help their direct reports align their personal goals with the company's or team's goals. To ensure the team is achieving its goals, line managers will also have to measure each employee's performance. For example, for a regulatory medical writer, a performance metric may be the number of new drug application submissions completed in a given time, or, as I have seen, the creation of automated tools to facilitate writing and help the whole team.

What a medical writer can say to a mentor but not to a line manager

Medical writers need to consider different things when speaking with mentors and line managers.

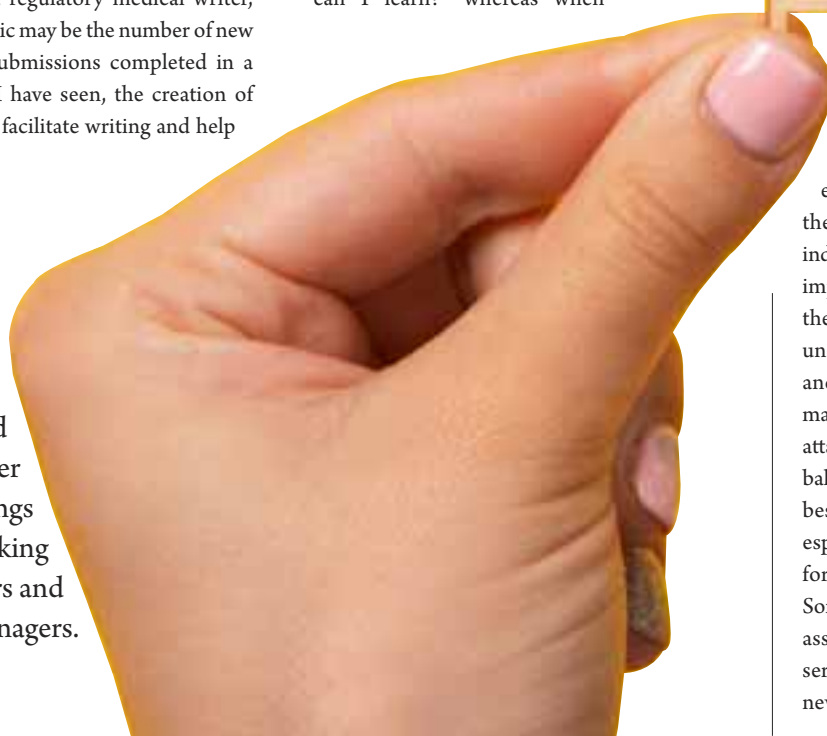
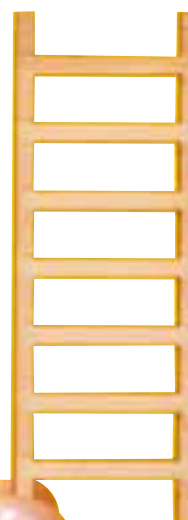
The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is more casual; mentors can be more forgiving about problems, giving the mentee more opportunity to learn from mistakes and benefit from the mentor's advice. For mentees, who are permanently in learning and consulting mode, the important question to ask before communicating with a mentor is, "What more can I learn?" whereas when

communicating with a line manager, it is most important to express competence and motivation. Some examples of differences in things a medical writer can say to a mentor or line manager are provided in Table 2.

Line managers who end up as mentors and vice versa

It is not uncommon to think that a good mentor can be a good line manager and that a good line manager can be a good mentor because there are some overlapping qualities. For example, for a line manager to achieve goals, they may need to do some coaching. For a new medical writer, a line manager can provide particularly valuable initial coaching. Examples include helping the writer generate high-quality deliverables by teaching them about different therapeutic areas and the clinical development process, providing them with expert advice, and allowing them to gain experience through self-learning. At the same time, to help a mentee achieve personal career goals, a mentor will need to help the mentee align their goals with the company's. Of course, both mentor and line manager roles can provide industry connections for future jobs.

Having a line manager who is also a mentor is most helpful for entry-level employees. Once the writer has developed their skills and has the competence to work independently, the mentor role will become less important than the line manager. To balance these two roles, the line manager needs to fully understand their direct report's talents, capacity, and characteristics. This will allow the line manager to develop a comprehensive plan with attainable short- and long-term goals. Effectively balancing the two roles can be difficult, and it is best that they remain somewhat separate, especially because line managers are responsible for busy teams with multiple business goals. Some organisations with mentorship systems will assign a team member who is more senior to serve as a mentor but not as a line manager for new hires.



Medical writers need to consider different things when speaking with mentors and line managers.

How to work well with a mentor or line manager

A good line manager is, first and foremost, a team leader, and they must value the short-term achievements of the employee over personal growth. Therefore, to best support the line manager, once an employee becomes more experienced, they should become less dependent on the line manager and focus on asking for specific resources rather than guidance or training. An employee also needs to make sure that they are working to their best ability to achieve personal goals that they have set together with their line managers. This should lead to larger responsibilities and allow the growth of professional and soft skills. For example, a writer may be given a leadership role for a document type that they have proven that they can independently develop. In this way, a positive feedback loop will form with the line manager to help a writer grow their professional skills and take on more challenges.

When working with a mentor, a medical writer needs to constantly communicate about knowledge gaps or concerns. With open communication, good mentors will use their

experience to help mentees find appropriate solutions. For example, a writer may not know the key components of a particular submission dossier or may need help using Microsoft Word efficiently. Through open and frequent communication, a mentee can take full advantage of the mentor's experience while showing progress, another positive feedback loop that can form between employees and line managers.

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Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by his employer or EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

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