



The National Mentoring Program in Public
Health Presents

A GUIDE TO BUILDING
EFFECTIVE MENTORING
RELATIONSHIPS

PUBLIC HEALTH STUDENT CAUCUS
IN OFFICIAL RELATIONS WITH THE
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ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is something that most of us have engaged in at various times of our lives, whether formally or informally. Many of us for example, can name individuals whom we have great respect and admiration for, individuals whom we hope to model ourselves and our development after. These individuals can be considered our mentors. Mentoring is a personalized, one-on-one approach to learning that is grounded in a personal, as well as a professional, relationship between a mentee, the learner, and a mentor, the teacher.

There is a tremendous need for more mentoring in public health. Mentoring may be one way to address some of public health's most pressing issues, including a dearth of leadership in the field, personnel shortages in virtually every health specialization, needed unification of public health professionals with an eclectic array of skills and interests, and better understanding and support of public health initiatives among the general public.¹

The National Mentoring Program in Public Health, a project of the Public Health Student Caucus (PHSC), which is in official relations with the American Public Health Association (APHA), was created to help meet these needs. The goals of this program are to improve the relevancy of the academic training that public health students receive; to increase the professional success and productivity of public health students and professionals; and to help strengthen the field of public health through the growth and retention of strong and committed leaders.

This manual is designed to provide some background on mentoring, including some important suggestions for establishing and maintaining new mentoring relationships. Although the Caucus does recommend using these helpful tips to guide your mentoring relationship, it is, of course, up to you to determine what works best for you and your mentor or mentee. It is important to remember that there is no one right mentoring method.

THE BENEFITS OF MENTORING FOR MENTEES

In virtually every profession imaginable, a mentoring relationship is considered an excellent route toward ensuring not only the vitality of a profession, but the growth of the workers within that profession.² We begin this discussion on mentoring relationships by taking a look at the benefits these relationships offer both mentees and mentors.

Mentors can open doors for mentees. Opened doors contribute to more social interaction and networking possibilities within ones profession, which, in turn, magnify possible career contacts and job opportunities.^{3,4}

Mentors can provide mentees with invaluable advice and specialized knowledge. Mentors can provide the counseling, guidance, and advice that could ultimately save mentees time, money, and sanity. It can be difficult to find this advice elsewhere.⁴

Mentors can help increase the professional success and productivity of a mentee. In a national survey of over five hundred women in academic medicine, for example, investigators found that women who had mentors had significantly more publications in peer reviewed journals and spent significantly more time in research activities than women who did not have mentors.⁵

Mentors can help enhance the overall career satisfaction and sense of well-being of a mentee. When a mentoring relationship is effective, a mentee realizes, through the actions of a mentor, that he or she is worth the investment, gaining a stronger sense of self-confidence and inspiration.⁶

THE BENEFITS OF MENTORING FOR MENTORS

Mentoring can help mentors to stay sharp. After all, many people argue that the best possible way to learn something is to teach it to someone else. Helping someone less experienced helps keep you abreast of your field. Doing so might also help improve a mentor's job performance. Through mentorship, mentors can change, improve, and never stagnate.^{4,6}

Mentoring encourages a mentor's creativity. Answering questions forces mentors to consider a variety of new solutions to tackle problems or options to advance within their field. Discussing these options with their mentee may inspire a mentor to think creatively in a way that he or she might have otherwise not had the incentive to do.⁴

Mentoring allows receiving by giving. Though you may not be financially rewarded for becoming a mentor, you may win the hearts and respect of people who will forever be grateful for your gift, which may be the best reward of them all!⁴

Mentoring helps carry on a mentor's legacy. Many people invest their heart and soul into their career, accomplishing much along the way. Mentoring gives mentors the opportunity to convey the knowledge and experience they have worked so hard to gain over the years to another.^{2,4}

By becoming a mentor, you have the opportunity to affect the future – you leave a part of yourself in everyone you mentor, your ideals, your ethics, and your professionalism.

-- J.L. Waugh

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD MENTEE

Before we provide suggestions on how to establish and maintain effective mentoring relationships, it is important to take a look at what some of the characteristics of good mentors and mentees might be. Here are some ideas we found in the literature.

Good mentees are eager to learn. Good mentees are aware of the benefits they could gain from a mentoring relationship and are, therefore, eager to open themselves up to and devote much time and energy to the mentoring process. It is reasonable to expect mentees to take the initiative in a mentoring relationship, especially at the start. ^{4,7}

Good mentees respect the time and effort a mentor gives to their mentoring relationship. Mentees should recognize and respect that their mentors are making a bigger investment in this relationship than they are. Remember, mentors are there to help you by pointing out the stepping stones, not by being one. Don't forget to thank your mentor for his or her guidance. ^{2,4}

Good mentees are willing to take action. Mentees cannot benefit from their mentoring relationship unless they are willing to take action on the information provided by their mentor. There are a few things worse than for a mentor to give their mentee a list of things to do and have them fail to follow-up. ⁴

Good mentees are willing to pass on the gift of mentoring. Mentees will inevitably benefit from effective mentoring relationships and should, therefore, be willing to give back a little of what they have gained in the process. One of the best ways to do this is to help another novice in the field. ⁴

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD MENTOR

Good mentors are proficient in their practice. Good mentors possess experience that mentees find valuable, and mentees should see a standard of excellence to pursue, a model to copy. Exemplary role modeling on the part of a mentor will positively contribute to the success of the mentoring relationship and the professional identity of the mentee. ^{8,9}

Good mentors are willing to share their knowledge and expertise. Good mentors have an unselfish desire to share their experience with and help other novices in their field. Good mentors are also comfortable with their own ignorance, as they realize that mentees also need to see them struggling with the unknown and searching for answers. ⁹

Good mentors have the ability to create a supportive learning environment. Of all the qualities a good mentor possesses, this is considered by many to be the most important. Good mentors maintain a proper balance between praise and criticism. Good mentors also nurture a mentee's independence while still providing the proper amount of guidance. ^{7,10}

Good mentors are committed to the mentoring process. Building strong mentoring relationships takes time, requires patience, and deserves respect. Good mentors do not hesitate to donate their time and share their knowledge. Good mentors are also willing to consistently assess the learning needs of their mentees. ^{4,9}

The most reasonable thing, after all, is to learn from those who can teach.

-- Sophocles

ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

It must be said from the start that there is no one right mentoring method. However, many people, once mentors and mentees themselves, agree on a number of points. Thus, mentors and mentees should keep the following important advice in mind when establishing a new mentoring relationship.

Conduct an opening interview. Set aside a good block of time to meet each other, either in person, by e-mail, or over the phone. Come prepared with questions, but be open to letting the interview unfold naturally. Use this opportunity to decide on your goals and objectives for this mentoring relationship, as well as your needs and expectations. ^{4,8,11,12}

Discuss your goals and objectives for this mentoring relationship. It is important to set goals that are specific, realistic, and obtainable at the beginning of this relationship. Setting specific goals will help guide your mentoring relationship. What outcomes do you expect from this relationship? ⁸

Discuss your needs and expectations for this mentoring relationship. It is important to set parameters for your mentoring relationship early on. Be direct and specific about what areas and/or skills and/or professional goals you want to be the focus of this learning experience. Do not be afraid to set boundaries and be clear about information that you feel should remain private. Be honest, open, and direct in your communication with each other. ^{8,13}

Get acquainted with your mentor and mentee as a person first. Is he or she married? Does he or she have particular hobbies? Do you share common interests outside your field? Find out some of the things that make your mentor or mentee unique and then move on to the career oriented topics. In doing so, you can establish a broader and potentially stronger foundation for your mentoring relationship. It is important to strike a balance between the personal and professional in a mentoring relationship.¹²

Familiarize yourself with the educational and professional experiences of your mentor and mentee next. Share your resume or curriculum vitae with each other as well as past or present coursework. It would be helpful, for example, for mentees who are current students to know what coursework might be the most helpful in the working world.^{8,11}

Share your vision of your profession with your mentor or mentee. What, for example, drives you to pursue a career in public health? Where do you think the future of public health lies in the United States and abroad? Where do you fit into this vision? Discussions like these, somewhat philosophical in nature, will probably evolve over the course of your mentoring relationship.¹⁴

Establish a regular meeting time. Regardless of whether you “meet” via e-mail or the telephone or in person, do not finish your first meeting or any in the future without setting up a time and place or method to “meet” again. As simple as this might sound, be sure that you know exactly how and when to best get in contact with each other, whether it’s in person, by phone, or via e-mail.⁸

MAINTAINING AN EFFECTIVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

Effective mentoring relationships are not born overnight. Participants must invest both time and energy into these relationships to make them work. How, then, can mentors and mentees create an atmosphere within their mentoring relationships that promotes professional growth? Here are a few suggestions.

Consistently refine and organize your goals. How will you reach the goals you set in your first meeting? What roles must you, as a mentor or mentee, play in order to reach these goals? Your goals and objective will change as you grow and the relationship evolves, but they will always be your how-to manual for this relationship. Setting specific goals and working towards them can truly keep you focused and help you achieve success. ^{4,8}

Share both your successes and your failures. Being involved in a mentoring relationship means being open, and that means sharing your mistakes and failures as well as your successes. A mentee, for example, needs to hear about the errors a mentor made along the way as well as their accomplishments. This lets the mentee see examples of the types of problems he or she can expect to encounter while pursuing a goal. ⁴

Encourage the independence of the mentee. The object of a mentoring relationship is to eventually make the mentee independent of, not dependent on, the mentor. Mentors, foster individual and independent career goals for your mentee. Share your past career experiences with your mentee, including how you stepped from one place to the next, but remember that the career goals of your mentee may be different from your own. ²

Be accessible and respond promptly to each other. Mentors and mentees should endeavor to keep the lines of communication open. Again, it is important to be honest, open, and direct in your communication with one another.

Regularly elicit feedback from the other on your performance. Try to give thoughtful and direct feedback on a regular basis. Regularly acknowledge the help or assistance you have received from each other and discuss, in a constructive way, the things you wish your mentor or mentee could do differently.¹³

Periodically take stock of your relationship. Are you meeting the goals you originally set for yourselves? Are your expectations with respect to the dynamics of the relationship being met? Make certain there are ample opportunities to address concerns and reconcile problems. Acknowledge that people learn and change during the course of these mentoring relationships. Be flexible enough to change the relationship and to change within the relationship.¹³

Always remember that there is no one right mentoring method. Whatever works for you and your mentor or mentee is the right method for your mentoring relationship. Trust that you will find your way as the mentoring relationship evolves. Make this mentoring relationship a wonderful experience – laugh, smile, and enjoy the process. And remember, all work and no play is not the way to enhance a relationship – with a mentor or a mentee.⁴

AND DON'T FORGET TO HAVE FUN!

CONCLUSION

It should be obvious from this discussion that mentoring relationships offer endless possibilities and numerous benefits for those who participate in them. Every person can learn how to be a good mentor or a good mentee and how to build strong mentoring relationships if he or she follows the simple suggestions outlined previously. Effective mentoring relationships are grounded in mutual respect, trust, and understanding, which does require time, patience, conscientiousness, and commitment. Most importantly, the benefits gained are clearly worth the investments made.

The Public Health Student Caucus congratulates you on your commitment to this program and the mentoring relationships you are now beginning to establish. We wish you the best in these endeavors and hope that you, too, reap many rewards from them.

A great [mentor] has a knack for making us think we are better than we think we are. [He or she] forces us to have a good opinion of ourselves. [He or she] lets us know [he or she] believes in us. [He or she] makes us get more out of ourselves. And once we learn how good we really are, we never settle for anything less than our very best.

-- Reggie Jackson

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