

Get the Mentoring You Deserve

Many successful scientists speak of people who played pivotal roles in their careers by supporting their interest in science, particularly at times when they were the most discouraged or confused. Often, such support came from mentors or from individuals found in professional networks. Now more than ever it is imperative that we take an active role in selecting appropriate mentors for ourselves. Effective mentoring can enable any individual who has a passion for science to find her or his own “best fit” for a career that melds life and career values. We must find individuals who can help us navigate our own pathways to a sustainable and happy life as a scientist.

During my own struggles over many years in finding the right mentors to guide me through the twists and turns in my career, I noted that there are many superb books and articles written for mentors and from the mentor’s perspective. However, there seemed to be few resources written for me, the mentee/protégé. And when I was mentoring others, my protégés often asked, “I know the role of my mentor, but what should I be doing?” As a result, I recently wrote a book for the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) framing questions, concerns, and issues from the protégé’s viewpoint.¹ My intent was to provide a handbook of practical tools and strategies that could be implemented for a minute or for a lifetime, and at all points in between. Some key concepts from that book are discussed below.

Mentors, Advisors, and Supervisors

First, a word about terminology: The term *mentor* conveys the counsel of someone who is not only more prominent, influential, or experienced but who is also guiding, protecting, and promoting the mentee/protégé’s career, training, and professional well-being. Mentors are different from supervisors and advisors, but the three terms are frequently used interchangeably and often erroneously. A *supervisor* is a person with the official task of overseeing the work of others and whose own



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performance is judged by how capably he/she manages them. An *advisor* is someone who offers unsolicited (or solicited) advice, though from a perspective of some amount of wisdom, authority, or experience. An important point is that the PhD advisor or postdoctoral advisor may not be able to fulfill all the mentoring needs of an individual, although many graduate and postdoctoral advisors/supervisors are also mentors in the best sense of the term. The experts who study the theory and practice of effective mentoring now affirm the importance of a “network of mentors,” because no one person is likely to meet all of an individual’s mentoring needs.²

Preparing to Be Mentored

Because few of us will have a perfect pathway to our career or a seamless meshing of our career into our lives, we can learn and grow from the perspectives of others. A necessary first step to fruitful mentoring relationships is introspection that leads to better knowledge and understanding of oneself. Although such introspection should be an intrinsic part of one’s journey through life and career, it can also be more painful and arduous at the times when it is most needed. To navigate through the complexities of your career, it may be helpful to consider the following topics in assessing what you want to work on with mentors. Or you can use these topics as a springboard to develop your own personalized list of mentoring needs at any particular point in time:

- Acquiring the requisite professional credentials for your career pathway
- Recognizing when a rich opportunity arises and how to pursue it
- Learning from mistakes or missteps and what to do next
- Dealing with biases and misconceptions
- Developing a sense of your career direction and timing
- Selecting appropriate role models
- Meshing your values and interests with the right workplace for you
- Obtaining a healthy balance among all the parts of your life



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- Creating opportunities for others
- Knowing when it is time to move on
- Stretching beyond your normal comfort zone in taking strategic risks

The young scientist, in particular, can learn to balance the different roles that lie ahead in both career and life. These changing needs will influence the types of mentoring sought in the framework of long-term strategies for career planning. Mentors can be people who influence facets of your life and career during interactions that can last a lifetime or just a minute. Look for people as mentors who are savvy, consistent, honest, and patient and who can help you with your own personalized mentoring needs.

Making Mentoring Relationships Work

Each element in a successful mentor–protégé relationship is a reflection of the temperament, interests, experience, and perspectives of the individuals involved. Not all encounters at all times with mentors will be uniformly positive. Sometimes a mentor may be distracted by concerns about her/his own life/career and not able to focus on what you need at that particular moment. Or you may be unable to articulate clearly some aspects of your mentoring needs. Some general principles can help keep your relationships and interactions with your mentors on track:

- Be honest with yourself and with your mentor
- Never embarrass your mentor or put your mentor in an awkward position
- Look for patterns in your life and in your career
- Have a sense of humor
- Recognize that your actions, whether good or bad, will often have consequences
- Seek the hidden, unwritten, and inside rules that operate in organizational cultures

You should look outside your comfort zone to broaden your network of mentors, to get varied perspectives, or to obtain mentoring for

a particular area of concern. Good mentors will ask hard questions of their protégés. In turn, protégés should recognize that dedicated mentors will help them uncover critical truths. The roles of organizational cultures and workplaces will also exert an important influence on your mentoring needs. Hence, it becomes critical to seek out and identify mentors who meet the needs of particular circumstances and times, and who have knowledge of career tracks you may wish to pursue.

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Be Proactive

Different life experiences, workplace settings, family frameworks, and individual aspirations make it very likely that you will seek out a range of mentors to help you on your scientific (and life) journey. Be sure to develop action steps to keep your mentoring needs on track. Don't assume that you will “bump into” the right person at the right time for the right opportunity. Be proactive and seek out the networks of support that will move you in the direction of *your* chosen career path. ■

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Note

This article is based on concepts presented in workshops and webinars by the author for AWIS (www.awis.org) over the past three years. The author was president of AWIS in 2006–2007 and spent the majority of her scientific career at the U.S. National Institutes of Health. She is now devoting her efforts to developing career enhancement and mentoring strategies for individuals and organizations. She has been a member of ASCB since 1995.

References

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