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Commentary

5 QUESTIONS EVERY MENTEE SHOULD HAVE AN ANSWER TO

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When we started our mentor-mentee relationship in academic medicine a decade ago, it became clear that both structure and expertise was necessary for success. Structure – in the form of expectations that outlined who was responsible for what, how often we should meet, and how best to communicate – made explicit that which is usually implicit. We also recognized that the expertise --- the content, technical and strategic advice – required for the mentee to succeed would need to be provided by more than one type of mentor. We ultimately developed a framework of best practices that unlocked the potential within each of us. We assembled this framework as a series of questions that we hope can also be useful to others.

We suggest using the following five questions during your academic career.

1. **Who is your primary career mentor?** Regardless of the discipline, every person starting their career should identify a senior person to guide them. This “career” mentor is typically someone who has “made it” in their field, so much so that they can help bring the incumbent to the promised land. The key attribute of outstanding career mentors is that they are outward-focused, curious about you and your ideas, committed to your success and will give you honest feedback on your performance. They focus on you, not just your career.¹ They put the relationship first. Unless they are starting off anew, they have a track record of being a successful mentor. Given their position, they can also help guide you when you need to negotiate for a promotion or another position with your current employer or elsewhere. A career mentor can thus be your division chief, department chair (if you are in a smaller department), or any faculty member who has achieved success in the field as reflected by promotion or tenure within or

outside of your department.

2. **Who is your “technical” mentor?** In every profession, technical skills are important. For surgeons, it is operating. For biostatisticians, it's performing sophisticated analyses. For psychiatrists, it is communicating with patients. And for those in primary care, it is being comprehensive while being highly efficient. In fact, for almost every profession we know, technical skills such as how to write reports, negotiate effectively, and present ideas cogently are the foundation of success. Consequently, every junior person needs a mentor to help them develop these critical skills. Your path to success will be shorter if you have someone who can help you learn how to write and speak well, especially early in your career. It is worth the effort to invest some time to learn these skills – they will pay dividends for years, if not decades, to come. So – who is that person for you?

3. **Have you identified sponsors?** A sponsor is someone who acts as your advocate.² They utilize their influence to help a mentee by opening doors. While a career or technical mentor can also serve in this capacity, some may not have the organizational position needed to make you more visible. A sponsor uses their connections to help you gain a prominent speaking role at an important scientific meeting, or land an influential national committee assignment or leadership position. They endorse you for specific roles, are willing to write effective letters of support, and nominate you for major awards. Sponsors could

also serve as a point of reference for a future employer. In short, sponsors deploy their personal and political capital to help mentees. In so doing, they strengthen their own legacy, gaining steadfast followers while nurturing stellar performers. Importantly, insufficient sponsorship may partially explain the continued leadership gap between men and women, generations, and between ethnic and racial groups despite the rise in diversity at entry-level positions in many fields.³ A sponsor (or two or three) will help you. Being “over-mentored” while “under-sponsored” is a real thing.

4. **Who is the master connector in your network?** Do you have allies in your professional colleagues that can introduce you to key people within and outside your medical school or organization? As Malcolm Gladwell writes in *The Tipping Point*,⁴ “connectors” make change happen through people. They help mentees find the right type of mentor and the most appropriate sponsor.² Connectors are superstar networkers with contacts galore resulting from their own successful careers. While a mentor or sponsor may serve as a connector, they often cannot. Good connectors rarely have the time to mentor in the conventional sense as they are often in senior executive roles – precisely why they can facilitate connections beyond their individual organization or discipline. Connectors tend to lead large departments or reside in the C-suite. Because others have helped them reach their prominent positions, they like to return the favor by using their impressive and extensive network to help more junior people: like you! One final

note: do not overlook younger people in your network, as, increasingly, some master connectors are relatively junior but have large followings on social media.

- 5. Do you have a diverse mentorship committee that meets regularly and is committed to your success?** We learned very quickly that diversity in mentorship is helpful. Having mentors who come from different backgrounds, have different skills, views and opinions help to ensure that mentees receive a balanced perspective.⁵ Diverse teams outperform homogenous ones,⁶ are more resilient, protect against mentor malpractice,⁷ and foster greater mentee growth. The ideal team may include your career or technical mentor but should also include key allies – your division chief, department chair, or those with different positions and expertise. How do you know you have the right team? Ask yourself: does your mentoring team care – *truly* care – for you? The famous philosopher Martin Buber distinguished between two types of relationships between people: I-it and I-thou. I-it relationships are characterized by a transactional approach to another person – what can I get from this relationship? I-thou relationships are characterized by respecting the dignity of each person regardless of who they are and what they can provide in return. You want your mentorship team to feature people who treat you as a “thou” not an “it.” How will you know? Trust your inner voice that has helped you get to this stage in your career.

Once the team is assembled, make sure you utilize them effectively. We recommend meeting at least 2 to 3 times a year with your mentoring team, ideally in person or using

skype or zoom or another networking application if some of the participants are at different institutions.

Conclusion

Mentorship is not easy. Getting the most from your mentors requires structure. By asking – and answering – these five questions, you will be better positioned to achieve success in your field. While these questions may seem daunting, do not despair. The most important first step is finding a career mentor who can help you grow and cross-link you to technical mentors, sponsors and connectors. You may not need all of these individuals at the outset of your career. But in time – you will.

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