Choosing a Mentor

Carol C Nadelson, MD
Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School
Director, Office for Women’s Careers, Brigham and Women’s Hospital
A mentor’s role

A mentor (or mentors): essential for success

A major predictor of academic and career success (publications, confidence)

There are multiple models of mentoring

- Individual
- Group
- Peer
A mentor’s role

- Teacher/coach
- Counselor/confidant
- Protector/cheerleader
- Promoter/advocate/guide
- Facilitator of other mentoring relationships
- Professional soulmate/friend

A mentor has credibility, power, expertise/experience, empathy, tenacity
One mentor is usually not enough

Different mentors may be important at different career stages and for different reasons

Multiple mentors are necessary and advantageous

- One all-purpose mentor is rare
- Avoid over-reliance on one; less potential for “lack of fit” or “personality conflicts”
- Research mentor may not have great interpersonal skills; administrative mentor may not have research expertise
Most cited reasons for needing a mentor (BWH)

- Self promotion
- Negotiation skills, conflict management
- Developing a promotion package
- Self assessment
- Integration of clinical and research activities
- Research design and funding
- Advice on papers

Weissman BA, Nadelson CC, Gould SL, 2000
A mentor’s responsibilities

- Facilitate professional development
  - Guide through academic politics
  - Encourage independence and collaboration
  - Link mentee to the organization and its priorities
  - Increase mentee productivity, creativity, satisfaction

- Provide contacts, network entry, opens doors
  - Recommend mentee for talks, study sections, societies, teaching and administrative assignments

- Obtain information about possible job opportunities

- Recommendations
A mentor’s responsibilities

- Facilitate applications for grants
- Protect mentee from project/research interference
- Assist in securing space, time, funding
- Provide useful feedback
- Give advice, support
- Foster transition to collegial status - sustained relationship
“Let me try that!”
Choosing a mentor

Consider

- What skills you need to learn/improve?
- What can be changed/improved?
- What networks/contacts would facilitate your goals?

THERE IS NO PERFECT MENTOR
Choosing a mentor

**Who:**

- You respect and are comfortable with (“fit”)
- Has similar goals, values, specific expertise
- Has your interest/career as a priority
- Keeps confidences
- Follows through with commitments
- Will actively include and invite you
Choosing a Mentor

Essential Information for mentee to gather

- Expertise: gather data on potential mentor including cv
- Record with other mentees
  - How many mentees does he/she have? (too many?)
  - Experience of other mentees with mentor?
- Alternative agendas (service required in return for mentoring)
- Reputation for failing to give credit to junior colleagues
- History of harassment; sexual, intellectual
- Time and interest in mentoring
- Likely to leave the institution or take another position, interfering with mentoring relationship
- Define your priorities
Mentor/mentee relationship - a two-way commitment

- Mutually identify assets, needs, short and long term goals
- Jointly set ground rules
  - Time, frequency, location and duration of meetings
  - Agree upon focus of work
- Trust is built on MUTUAL respect and confidentiality
A mentee’s responsibilities

- Collaborate with mentor
- Be honest
- Be prepared to be challenged
- Be open to advice and criticism
- Attend to details and deadlines
- Take initiative
When relationships don’t fulfill expectations

- Failure to help build professional networks, advocate, and create opportunities
- Inadequate career guidance
- Lack commitment; infrequent meetings
- Fail to provide feedback and challenge
  - Negative feedback without constructive criticism
  - Squelch enthusiasm/initiative
- Inadequate guidance on balancing collaboration and individual efforts; fail to facilitate independence
- Excessive non-career productive duties

Ramanan, et al, 2002
Bickel, 1998
When relationships don’t fulfill expectations

- Disrespect; expectation that mentee should defer
- Boundary violations -- personal and professional; ethical problems
- Use of mentee to advance their own causes
- Disagreement on the potential of the mentee
- Poor “fit”
- Failure to involve other mentors or transition to collegial role

Ramanan, et al, 2002
Bickel, 1998
“Might I sound a note of caution?”
Mentoring issues for women and minorities

- Relationships seem easier between “like” individuals:
  - Difficulty empathizing with a minority/woman

- Performance of minorities/women scrutinized more closely: higher hurdles to prove themselves to potential mentors

- Minority/women contributions may be undervalued

- Same sex mentoring is not more successful than opposite sex mentoring

Bickel, J, AAMC, 1998
Harvard Business School 3/29/95

Choosing a Mentor, 9/23/2009