

VIEWPOINT

VOICES OF CARDIOLOGY

The Importance of Mentorship and Sponsorship



Tips for Fellows-in-Training and Early Career Cardiologists

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“We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.”

—Winston Churchill (1)

In the era of social media and online networks, the traditional mentor-mentee relationship is more important now than in the past because the constant online connections may often lack the in-depth, in-person, candid, and honest exchanges that are essential in any relationship (2). Mentorship is a key factor in the professional growth and development of a trainee or junior faculty. Physicians should engage mentors who share one’s research, clinical, administrative, and advocacy interests early with an honest dialogue regarding mutual goals (3). There is increasing awareness, however, that mentorship may not be sufficient for career advancement, particularly for women and those under-represented in the medicine faculty (4). The concept of sponsorship is gaining recognition in medicine and is similarly viewed as important, but not sufficient to guarantee advancement, specifically to high levels of leadership (4). In this paper, we describe our personal approaches to mentorship and sponsorship, and discuss a few practical suggestions to secure long-lasting relationships.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MENTORSHIP AND SPONSORSHIP AND THE NEED FOR BOTH

Whereas a mentor is a senior or a peer who is instrumental in developing a skill set, a sponsor is an advocate who provides influential and promotional support, and helps secure career advancement opportunities. There are differences between the roles of mentors and sponsors. Mentors can be at any level in the organization, and may not necessarily need to be in a position of power. Mentors should be selected for their content expertise, and often work behind the scenes to support their mentees. Sponsorship is distinct from mentorship, although mentors can be sponsors if highly placed and well connected. Sponsors are highly placed within or outside one’s organization or institution and have an influence on decisions regarding appointments to leadership positions, promotions, and awards. The significance of sponsorship grows as one’s career advances, underscoring the importance of seeking out both mentors and sponsors. Specifically, understanding sponsorship as a distinct professional relationship may provide access to networks and opportunities for deliberate career advancement (4).

UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT TIME TO SEEK MENTORSHIP AND SPONSORSHIP

All physicians should seek out mentors as early as possible and recognize that they do not have to all be in-depth formal relationships. Creating diversity in mentorship is very important. Professional societies and volunteer science organizations are particularly important in growing one’s network outside their institutions, and one should seek to continuously develop mentoring networks. The improbability of

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finding a single person who can fulfill the diverse mentoring needs of another individual, especially because many faculty members take on multiple obligations in addition to mentoring, may be high. Hence, physicians should seek out seniors, peers, and juniors in numerous roles, and establish a diverse and a comprehensive network of mentors who all have a unique role (5). Physicians should recognize that, as their mentoring needs evolve over time due to progress in their career, so too should their portfolio of mentors grow in order to remain effective (5).

UNDERSTANDING THE QUALITIES OF A MENTOR AND SPONSOR THAT ARE UNIQUE TO YOUR NEEDS

A mentor is someone who can offer new expertise, increase your self-awareness, provide learning edges, offer resources both formally and informally, challenge your decisions, and motivate you to be better. Physician mentorship is not hierarchical—and should not be. The mentor-mentee relationship is a partnership. Physicians should start by looking for a person who has the time and desire to truly invest in their future. Physicians should choose an individual who can act like a sponsor rather than out of self-promotional interest. A mentor should be willing to promote the mentee and provide opportunities for growth and improvement. In circumstances where a mentor may act out of self-interest and potentially hamper the growth of the mentee, it is important for the mentee to act out of courage and change the mentor. The successful sponsorship and mentorship relationships are based on trust and respect. Trust ensures that the mentee has accountability, because the sponsor or mentor's credibility and reputation are involved.

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO SET EXPECTATIONS IN A RELATIONSHIP

The physician who identifies a potential mentor should be honest and open, and if the mentorship relationship proceeds, the two should set expectations about the kind of communication that will occur, how often, and the frequency with which the mentor will check in to see how things are going. It is important to set the expectations of the exchange, because the relationship may be strained if one party has higher expectations than the other does. In a more formal mentoring relationship, specific goals should be established and a timeline should be made to demonstrate progress. Mentees should come prepared to a mentoring meeting with an agenda and demonstrate follow through. For informal mentoring

relationships, defining a sense of purpose, receiving feedback on career plans, discussing work-life integration techniques, and acquiring promotional support could be some potential goals.

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO END MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE NOT MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

Mismatched relationships often do not materialize. In academic medicine, ineffective mentorship can lead to difficulty in retaining junior faculty, disillusionment with career choice, and decreased grant funding (4). Thus, a mentor should be willing to address multiple aspects of the mentees' growth and well-being, including burnout and career dissatisfaction. Failed mentoring relationships include poor communication, lack of commitment, personality differences, perceived (or real) competition, conflicts of interest, and the mentor's lack of experience. Successful mentoring relationships include reciprocity, mutual respect, clear expectations, personal connection, and shared values (6). One good approach to ending a mentor-mentee relationship is by having an open and honest discussion of future expectations and missed opportunities. Another strategy for dealing with unsuccessful mentoring relationships includes having a facilitator or department chair as mediator, although one should always have an open conversation with the mentor as well. It is always a good practice to thank a mentor or sponsor for their time and availability, and ask them to remain as a resource in your career. It is important for mentees or protégés to recognize that the best relationships are the ones that end on a positive note, with these individuals serving as an advisory role in the future.

The authors of this article share their personal experiences with mentorship and sponsorship. Dr. Nupoor Narula, a cardiology fellow at Weill Cornell Medicine, writes that her first mentor, a basic scientist, focused on research methodology including developing a precise research protocol, indulging in critical literature review, and transcending conventional paradigms. Her second mentor was a compassionate patient advocate, who further helped her learn to translate basic scientific principles into real-time practice. Her third mentor enthused her to be detail-oriented and taught her the importance of carefully listening to a patient's story to avoid bias of premature closure for a diagnosis or management strategy. Her fourth mentor reinforced in her the relentless drive to do all we can with sincerity and excellence. Working closely with her experienced mentors, she has witnessed that the tradition of the

mentor-mentee relationship transcends geographical, sex, and age boundaries.

Dr. Mohammad Mostafa Ansari-Ramandi, a cardiologist from Iran University of Medical Sciences, writes that his parents were his first mentors. He is very fortunate to have warm and engaged parents who identified his weaknesses and strengths earlier on, encouraged him to become genuine, creative, and courageous, and taught him the importance of hard work irrespective of the outcome. He has always cherished the qualities of accessibility, ability to foster independent thought, patience and optimism in his mentors.

Dr. Kyriacos Mouyis, a cardiology specialist registrar at the Royal London Hospital Barts Health NHS Trust, writes that mentoring for him has largely been about life-long relationships and self-improvement. His first life-long mentoring experience came after finishing medical school while working in an acute medicine floor in a busy tertiary hospital, where he found himself struggling to keep up with the demands of patient care. It was then that a senior trainee in his team gradually took him under his wing. Dr. Mouyis was able to closely observe professional conduct and learned by example. As the relationship progressed, he learned to be a patient advocate and humbly challenge authority when not in the patient's best interest.

Dr. Garima Sharma, an early career cardiologist from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, believes that sponsorship in the workplace is a measurable dynamic between an advocate who is an established leader and a mentee who is seeking support, career guidance, and an overall experience that

will transform her career. Her best experience with sponsorship came from a completely serendipitous meeting with a female head of department who was instrumental in transforming her career by providing the necessary visibility outside the institution. She believes that not all professional connections need to be calculated and intentionally pursued, and that sometimes one must allow the development of life-changing events by pure serendipity.

CONCLUSIONS

The mentor-mentee relationship is a true gift, because mentors help us shape our professional careers with their wisdom and perspective. Mentorship demands dedication, patience, passion, and time for both parties, and although it is a selfless act, mentors rejoice in seeing their mentees excel. Devising learning opportunities for others is as educational for the mentor as it is for the mentee. It also provides exposure to diverse ideas and styles while developing leadership and management skills. In sponsorship, a sponsor for high-visibility and career-advancing opportunities puts a protégé forward. As one's career progresses, mentoring and sponsoring junior colleagues becomes an essential part of this selfless tradition and remains all of our collective responsibility.

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