

“Should I count on my program director being my primary mentor or trust that mentoring relationships will develop naturally with other practitioners?”

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Mentors come in all shapes and sizes—literally and figuratively. The stereotypical mentor is an older and wise male authority figure who is held in high esteem by the protégé. In the movies, Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*, Mr. Keating from *Dead Poets Society*, and Obi-Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars* come to mind. But not all mentors are men ... or older ... or wise (think Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*). Mentors may hold formal leadership positions, such as the Headmaster Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*, but more often than not, they are ordinary people whom we serendipitously encounter, like Sean Maguire in *Good Will Hunting*. The best mentoring relationships are like close friendships—there are some general ingredients for success, but following a strict recipe never seems to work. It’s a product of timing, personal needs, and personality traits of both the mentor and the person being mentored. So, although your residency program director might well become your lifelong mentor, don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t work out that way. Nonetheless, developing strong mentoring relationships is important because they are a key element in your professional development and advancement.

Most “accomplished” professionals, scientists, and business leaders state that a strong mentoring relationship has been a fundamental ingredient to their success. A great mentor is often someone who has mastered a specific area of knowledge or a particular skill, who is well known in the institution and/or profession, and who possesses certain personal qualities. Research has shown that mentors are typically 10–20 years older than their protégés. And mentor-protégé pairs are often the same gender. But that doesn’t mean smaller or bigger gaps in age aren’t possible or that cross-gender mentoring relationships don’t work. Mentoring relationships are usually initiated during a period of shared work responsibilities or when the pair discovers a set of common professional interests. During this initial phase, the mentor often sends welcoming messages to the potential protégé. And in a reciprocal manner, the protégé willingly spends more time working with the mentor. The relationship is further cultivated by working together on a series of projects, which brings both parties professional satisfaction. The very best mentors not only teach and provide advice, but also sponsor (e.g., vouch for the good character and skills of the protégé to others) and befriend (e.g., invite the protégé for an informal dinner at home with the family). Thus, with time, many mentoring relationships develop a personal quality that extends beyond professional boundaries.

Mentoring is a relationship that requires the active participation of both parties. Each contributes in meaningful ways to shared work that’s a source of pride and recognition. Even though the mentor often has more experience, resources, and professional connections, the protégé brings strong skills, budding talents, energy, and enthusiasm. Although this symbiotic relationship often advances the careers of both the mentor and the protégé, neither party should “use” the other for that end, just as we should never “use” our friends to bring us happiness or relieve our loneliness—rather, these are merely by-products of friendship.

You can increase your chances of finding a great mentor by actively seeking one. But, similar to finding new friends or a future spouse, you can try a bit too hard. For example, it’s probably not

wise to say to someone on the first day you meet, “I like you a lot. Will you be my friend?” Similarly, I don’t recommend going up to someone you admire and saying, “Hi! I admire you a lot. Will you be my mentor?” It’s perfectly fine to think it, but a more indirect approach is in order. “I admire your work” or “I really like your approach” or “I’m curious how you got started” is a subtler way to express your interest. And, similar to starting a new friendship, you should make plans to spend more time with your potential mentor. Find out what projects he or she is currently involved in, and volunteer your talents. Naturally, you should seek potential mentors who share professional interests with you and whose work appeals to you. Volunteering your time to participate in a project that holds little interest to you or to which you are unprepared to make a meaningful contribution is not a good way to start.

Not everyone knows how to be a good mentor or has the capacity to mentor several people at the same time. Some potential mentors won’t pick up on your welcoming signals. Some won’t have the time to fit you into their busy schedule. And others simply won’t feel a connection with you. Moreover, after you’ve worked alongside the potential mentor for a few weeks or months, you may no longer feel it’s a good fit for you, either. But if the chemistry is right and both parties make an effort, something magical happens. A great mentoring relationship will boost confidence, unearth gifts, enhance careers, and be a source of camaraderie—for the mentor and for you.

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