

5 Successful approaches to mentorship and sponsorship

The academic game has many hidden rules and may require some agile responses to opportunities. It can be hard to work out which directions will achieve the best outcomes and to identify the pros and cons of different options. Two of the most critical, but under-recognized, factors that contribute to a successful academic career are mentorship and sponsorship. Mentoring is linked to the retention of early career academics (Dunham-Taylor et al., 2008) and more rapid career progression (Hegstad and Wentling, 2004). Mentors and sponsors offer an expert view of your capabilities and potential and the different paths that are emerging. They can help you fast track through the hurdles that are likely to come your way and keep the right balance in building your profile. Successful academics note the value of mentorship in expediting their careers. In some cases, initial associations that commence as strong support for an emerging academic can span many years of long-term collaborations.

While some academics are fortunate in having generous benefactors who are there from the start, many have to find, and then cultivate, suitable people. This chapter therefore explores the process of identifying and then engaging suitable mentors and sponsors.

What is a mentor?

A mentor is someone who can assist you in reflecting, planning, and managing your career strategy (Nakamura and Shernoff, 2009). Their primary focus is to assist your development by offering career and psychosocial support (Young and Perrewe, 2000; Scandura and Williams, 2004; Brown et al., 2009; Sawatzky and Enns, 2009). Mentors are often more experienced senior colleagues who share their knowledge and expertise with you to assist with decision-making. Their knowledge of you and your background, combined with an informed assessment of the environment in which you are operating, ensures you are receiving appropriate guidance to make good decisions and judgements. In essence, they act as a microscope, horoscope and telescope to provide different views of the present context and future possibilities. They enable a close and personal interaction that is intensive and sustained, unlike other forms of support that may be more 'interventionist' in intent (Gibson, 2005). A particular contribution is their focus on social learning— that is, how the real world operates, and how you can best fit into that setting (McDowall-Long, 2004).

While mentors are generally sought from more experienced colleagues, peer mentors also offer many benefits through sharing their own insights and learning. Reviewing common experiences, and cross comparisons with peers, offer an important mirror into the lived experience that is occurring and the broader institutional setting that is in place. Peers are particularly valuable in offering emotional support during times of change and growth, as their own journey is similarly unfolding.

The benefits of mentorship

Mentorship brings many benefits to both parties. As the mentee or protégé you will be assisted in:

- Developing and refining professional skills and knowledge.
- Building professional and collaborative networks.
- Developing deeper insights about academic and professional communities.
- Exploring potential career options and strategies.
- Reviewing your personal and professional capabilities.
- Identifying areas of growth and learning that will be beneficial.

Mentors also benefit from offering their support. Through their interaction with protégés, they can:

- review their own career path and reflect on accumulated knowledge and insights
- leave a legacy through guiding and supporting talented new academics
- develop new skills and insights through mutual discussion and enquiry
- learn of new fields of knowledge and issues that could inform their own work and reflections
- identify potential talent that might be recruited into their own research group or projects
- develop potential research partnerships and collaborations, and possibly
- develop joint publishing/projects as time progresses.

Of particular note is the recognition that academic mentorship can be a lifelong partnership – with the role of the mentor and the nature of the relationship changing over time (Duda, 2004a).

Clarifying the mentoring focus

The process of entering academe is a very big transition for many people. It requires considerable agility in straddling the complex, complementary, but competitive fields of research and teaching. It is rare to find a mentor who can provide guidance on all

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areas of need. Different people have different areas of knowledge and expertise. A very high achieving academic with an outstanding track record, for example, might have little to offer in terms of advice about balancing family and work. Then again, they might!

The first step in the mentorship process is to be clear about the support that you seek. The choice of mentor is partly driven by a careful assessment of your current and future needs. As the following options illustrate, there may be quite an array of areas that could benefit from some guidance. The mentor may be able to address some of these, but is more likely to have particular skills and talents that relate to one or two areas. In fact, there is increasing recognition of the need to build a 'portfolio of mentors' (Higgins, 2000; de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004).

During the first few months of commencing in a new university, an **orientation mentor** can be invaluable (Sullivan-Brown, 2002). These mentors would normally be someone who has a good knowledge of the institution, the personalities that are likely to be encountered, and the way in which academics work and the broader institutional context function. Their internal networks and practical know-how can provide the necessary entry into a number of beneficial communities and ensure you are forewarned about some of the likely pitfalls. Cultural, teaching, research and policy contexts can be outlined, along with some indication of performance requirements and, possibly, some cautionary tales. In some universities new staff are appointed an orientation mentor for the first few weeks. This does not preclude finding others who can also help to interpret this world. In fact, it is useful to have several sources to ensure the messages that are being conveyed to you are correct. You need the right information to ensure you establish yourself as a great new asset to your school and university. Orientation mentors need to be familiar with the broad functions of your university, faculty and/or research community, but may not be senior members. However, it can be beneficial to have someone who has a more senior role as their broader perspective can identify any risks that need to be avoided and the opportunities that can be maximized.

Entering a new work setting can sometimes be a hazardous occupation, particularly if the academic community is divisive or highly competitive. In these situations it is critical to get a clear sense of the political and social context in which your work will operate, particularly if resources are tight and workloads are high. Even in good work settings it is useful to learn how you are expected to operate, and how the annual cycle works. **Contextual mentors** can offer practical insight into the academic context, protocols for academic work, and guidance on those who have knowledge, influence or power in a particular work setting. They can also offer advice on how you might best manage your relationships with important members of your academic community. These mentors often become apparent quite quickly on your arrival. They are likely to introduce themselves and share some tips for survival. Your discipline head or peers may also operate in this capacity. Contextual mentoring often operates on an 'as need' basis, and may be sought when required, rather than set up as a formal arrangement.

Career mentors play a very important role in guiding effective career management. A successful academic career requires considerable planning and consideration of long-term strategies to identify and maximize opportunities that arise. Normally a career mentor will be more senior, with an academic record that parallels the type

of career you are seeking to build. The mentor's considerable experience will assist in guiding your steps and strategies. Their review of your academic track record to identify gaps and vulnerabilities can be particularly valuable. While career mentors may be found in your local community, they may also be located elsewhere. Your supervisor may fill this role (Richard et al., 2009), but it needs to be recognized that sometimes guidance on careers and academic progress is better discussed with someone who does not have a stake in your everyday outcomes. (For example, your supervisor may ask you to take on considerably more service roles than they could reasonably request. Their first priority may relate to getting the work done, rather than helping you balance teaching, research and engagement, or considering your future needs.) Supervisors can offer considerable support and resourcing to help you progress your career goals, and should see this as part of their role (Scandura and Williams, 2004). Career mentors may also be sourced outside academe, particularly if you feel that you wish to explore more diverse career opportunities (Higgins, 2000; de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004).

A key priority when moving into academe is to build a comprehensive understanding of your particular discipline and to establish a strong presence as an up and coming figure. While the PhD offers a preliminary insight into the field, it is only a small part of a wider macrocosm. As a new academic you will need to build a much bigger picture of the emerging issues and opportunities that you will encounter. A **discipline mentor** is someone who has a wide breadth of knowledge of the discipline and intricate understanding of the lines of research that are emerging internationally. They may also have a strong reputation for teaching and research supervision excellence. In essence, they know the game and understand the international, national and university landscape. These mentors are expert in their field. Their networks will be extensive, linking to other international scholars who are also contributing to the growth of the discipline. They may sit on national committees, be widely published and cited, and fill many different roles in representing disciplinary interests. Discipline mentors are particularly valuable in guiding a new research interest, exploring how the intertwined roles operate or in identifying potential areas of collaboration. They are often looking for new individuals to refresh their expert pool, and will be pleased to explore possible areas of development with you. Generous discipline mentors can offer entry into the networks, assist your integration into reviewing roles, and identify important opportunities for you to access. While you may find great discipline mentors close to your office door, look more widely across your field too.

As a new researcher you face a time of immense learning, frustration and challenges as you step into new fields of endeavour and forge your reputation for being an independent researcher. It is therefore very helpful to identify someone who is willing to act as a research mentor. **Research mentors** can fill a number of roles that will guide you through this learning period. First, they can offer guidance in critically reviewing emergent research ideas, proposals and publications. In this capacity they offer five benefits:

- *Supportive* – recognizing and acknowledging your strengths.
- *Constructive* – identifying areas requiring work, and how they might be improved.

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- *Insightful* – exploring potential areas of related interest which might be included or strengthened.
- *Informative* – providing insights into the competitive process and how it operates.
- *Realistic* – advising if the grant or publication is ready.

Second, research mentors can provide guidance on the strategic deployment of your effort. Is this the right journal to target? Which publication channel will generate the greatest benefit? Which conference will be best for this research paper? Is my time better spent on two more papers or a grant submission? Third, they can also provide support during the academic acceptance/rejection process and its associated emotional upheavals. Finally, research mentors offer another avenue to access relevant networks and associated opportunities.

In a similar vein, you might seek a **teaching mentor** to assist you in planning and reviewing your educational practice and impact. Experienced teachers can offer many types of support – from modelling good practice, sharing resources, critiquing your methods or designs, to guiding your research about your teaching. Look for teachers who have been recognized for their excellence and who demonstrate passion and dedication. Inspirational people are infectious and will buoy you up, while supporting you in taking some risks to be innovative.

If you are leading a project team or a group of research students, you will need to build some basic leadership skills as rapidly as possible (see Chapter 18). As you move into leadership roles, look for a **leadership mentor** (Duda, 2004b) who is well regarded and respected for their generosity, effective guidance of groups, and capacity to achieve the utmost from the team's efforts. A leadership mentor can encourage your reflection and skill development in guiding and supporting others. They can be particularly helpful in exploring the complex issues that arise when managing tight resources, talented people, and demanding deadlines. You might also seek support in this area from professionals in your university, or coaches who can work with you in your development.

Peers who are keen to share their experiences and reflect on their progress with colleagues in a similar position can also provide mentorship. **Peer mentor** support can include the exchange of information, learning, insights, academic practice, networks, peer review of teaching, sharing of resources, support, energy, enthusiasm, social interaction and reflections. These mentors fill a very different role – uncertainties, vulnerabilities and future aspirations are but some of the areas that can be explored in a non-threatening forum of this nature. It is particularly important to build a friendship network in your academic community, and to identify people who would be pleased to act as peer mentors. You will gain strong affirmation and encouragement from each other. These relationships will be less formally managed and may operate through an occasional lunch or coffee break. It is important, though, to make time for these discussions.

There are, of course, other aspects that you might wish to seek help to explore. If your life has moved into straddling a young family and a career, it can be very useful to seek advice from someone who has successfully managed both (or at least, that might

be how it seems to outsiders!). The types of mentors you seek are really endless, and will reflect your evolving needs and challenges.

Successful mentors

Successful mentors may demonstrate generosity, positive advocacy and realistic consideration of the academic environment (Lee et al., 2007), effective communication, listening and questioning skills, and the capacity to see the mentee's context (Boziones, 2004; Waters, 2004; Brown et al., 2009). While successful mentors have a wealth of experience on which to draw, it is important that they recognize that the path of the mentee will not replicate their own history. Instead, the mentor offers a means of weighing options and judging the most desirable course of action. This capacity to move beyond thinking about self and into the skin and context of the mentee is a very important precondition for success.

Successful mentorship is predicated on some basic understandings as to how the interactions will operate. Some of these principles include:

- The primary purpose of the mentor is to help the mentee identify, review and weigh options, make informed judgements, measure risk taking, and make strategic decisions. The setting of challenging, aspirational goals is the mark of a good relationship.
- The mentor can greatly assist this process by questioning and probing to provide opportunities for the mentee to reflect, explore and question their own perspectives. The mentor is not there to simply give advice and instructions on how things might/should be done.
- Ideas and observations should be communicated and explored in an open, non-judgemental fashion.
- Any feedback should be at the request of the mentee and reflect the individual's context and background.
- The discussions should primarily relate to the mentee's agreed development goals and priorities.
- Discussions about intellectual property and ideas should be treated as confidential.
- The discussions can be quite wide-ranging, as new ideas, expertise, models of good practice and lessons learned are exchanged, but each session should result in productive outcomes. This is not an opportunity to have a talkfest or listen to the mentor's memoirs.

Successful mentees

As the mentee you play a critical role in this relationship. The time a mentor spends in discussions and furthering your interests needs to be repaid through commensurate

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effort on your part, and evident follow-through on agreed goals. To get the most from a mentoring relationship, aim to demonstrate:

- Courtesy and respect for the mentor's knowledge, skills and reputation.
- An openness in communicating needs and expectations (Waters, 2004).
- A keen desire to learn, explore ideas, and seek guidance or feedback.
- Responsibility for identifying, reviewing, and weighing options.
- Willingness to receive honest feedback and to act on that advice, or at least, reflect on it (Young and Perrewe, 2000).
- Commitment to pursue agreed goals and plans (Young and Perrewe, 2000).
- Willingness to experiment, trial new processes and procedures, and move beyond the comfort zone.
- Responsibility in managing the meetings and interactions.

Identifying suitable mentors

The process of identifying suitable mentors will differ for each individual, depending on the type of mentor being sought and the level of support being offered by the university or school.

Formal mentorship opportunities are often offered as part of development programmes (e.g. Debowski, 2007) or as discrete programmes (e.g. Allen, 2003; Szumacher et al., 2006). New approaches, such as mentoring circles (Darwin and Palmer, 2009) can be a valuable way of building skills and confidence with colleagues. The training of mentors also increases the likelihood of successful mentoring partnerships (Kochan, 2002; Omary, 2008). In some cases, the university may offer support in sourcing and matching mentors and mentees. However, the ultimate success of a formal mentoring programme depends on the commitment of the mentee. Passive, distracted, or disinterested mentees will not keep their mentors engaged: they have much better ways to spend their time.

If you are not able to access formal programmes, it is still very easy to build a robust approach to finding and initiating good relationships. Once you have clarified the priorities you wish to explore with your mentor, you can then identify suitable 'candidates'. You might, for example:

- Ask your supervisor, head of school, or head of research centre to suggest some names.
- Conduct a literature search on your discipline area to identify some leading academics publishing in your area of interest. Review their profiles and contact them to explore your needs.
- Review conference paper abstracts to identify potential people of interest. Attend their presentation and make yourself known to them. Be prepared to ask intelligent questions! If you would like more time to prepare, send an email following your return to the university.

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- Canvass the opinions of your colleagues as to who might be a good mentor.
- Investigate leading academics in your local university and consider whether any might be suitable mentors.
- Seek the assistance of your research or teaching services, or other agencies that can recommend successful academics. You will find that certain people are regularly noted by many sources.
- Monitor your university publications to identify people of interest.
- Attend networking and other university functions to identify potential mentors.
- Visit a potential mentor's own university if you are travelling to a related event.

Once you have identified a potential mentor, conduct some due diligence on them, particularly with respect to their track record, reputation, current activities, projects, and suitability with your desired focus.

Make contact with them to see if they would consider being a potential mentor. This is best conducted as a personal contact – either in person or by phone. Following this initial contact, email your current CV and a short review of your research interests, achievements and goals. Your mentor may also share their profile for your background information.

Building an effective relationship

Once a mentor has agreed to participate, it will be necessary to initiate the relationship. The first meeting is normally an opportunity to clarify expectations and agree on how the relationship might operate. Some useful questions to assist in the discussion include:

- What do we want to achieve from this relationship?
- What are the main areas that our discussion might emphasize?
- What time frame are we considering?
- How will the mentoring process work?
- Who is responsible for maintaining the connection? How should this be managed?
- Where shall we meet?
- How often?
- What are the expectations in relation to preparation?
- What are our understandings with respect to confidentiality, respect, honesty and trust?

Following this first meeting, you will need to maintain the relationship. Ensure the role to be played by each partner is clearly understood. Promptly act on any agreed goals that have been discussed: each meeting should show a progressive development of the

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identified strategy. As the mentee, take the initiative in arranging regular meetings and other opportunities to interact (Foote and Solem, 2009). Be at the meetings on time, or a little before, and prepare for the discussion to maximize the outcomes. It is useful to share materials and revisions well ahead of time. Critical questions that need to be explored are usefully shared prior to the meeting so that the mentor can think about them. There may be opportunities where the tables can be reversed: mutual sharing of contacts, insights and new ideas can support the mentor's growth. Frequency of interaction increases the benefits from the mentoring, particularly in guiding career strategies (Bozionelos, 2004).

When is it over?

Not all mentoring relationships succeed or last. There are many factors that can impact on the durability. In some cases, the personalities may be ill suited. In others, the need is short-term rather than a long-term focus. Some academics find that they may outgrow their mentor or their context changes. Others will move to new employers, new disciplines, or out of the sector entirely. In many cases, the meetings will span longer gaps or shift into a more collaborative focus. The most critical issue is to be open about the status of the relationship and to discuss any interactive challenges that are emerging. Recognize that the relationship will change over time as the goals are achieved.

Sponsors

Mentors offer particularly close support so that their mentees can test ideas and gradually build viable strategies for implementation. In effect, they offer developmental guidance on career strategies and processes and help you clarify your goals. Establishing the identified skills, capabilities and evidence can take some time, requiring a sustained relationship.

Sponsors are primarily focused on helping you achieve those identified goals by providing avenues for you to fast track your strategy. They are generally people who have significant power, influence, capacity and willingness to create new opportunities for you. Some typical actions a sponsor might take include facilitating networking opportunities, sponsoring entry into key networks, recommending their protégés for roles that will offer good profile or experience, and acting as a referee as needed. To perform these functions, the sponsor needs to be aware that you exist! Many early career academics patiently wait to be noticed, to little avail. Be proactive in seeking support. Make contact with potential sponsors and proffer your CV and a brief career profile. Outline your goals and the support you are seeking. You are then on the radar and the sponsor will keep you in mind. And, of course, if you do get offered opportunities – take them up and make the utmost use of them. This may mean looking at all other commitments to see what needs to be dropped. You will need to make sufficient space

to shine in these higher profile settings. Keep your sponsor informed of your progress and make sure you convey your appreciation.

Coaching

It is important to both build on your strengths and assets and identify areas that require development. If your writing or communication skills are poor, for example, you are likely to have some major challenges in forging an academic career. Rather than struggling alone to address the issues, consider hiring a coach to assist you. Coaches are skilled in working with one individual to correct long-standing habits and errors. They can analyse the issue, identify small learning goals, and work step-by-step through the incremental changes that are needed. Because they are focusing on one particular learning outcome and will need to meet with you regularly, progress will be sustained and evident. Coaching can be an important investment in your future. Your mentor can assist in identifying possible areas for this intensive support. Your supervisor might also offer feedback on areas that are holding you back. Don't see these as criticisms – regard them as learning opportunities and act on them.

Mentors and sponsors are an essential part of your career strategy. Aim to have at least one mentor at any time and ensure they are rewarded with your development in the agreed areas of need.