HOW TO BE PROACTIVE IN YOUR MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

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How to Be Proactive in Your Mentoring Relationships

It is no secret that professionals are often groomed by others who have paved the way in their chosen fields. The ability to proactively seek out those mentors which truly provide valuable guidance can be vital in determining a postdocs career path. Being proactive can be as simple as monthly check-in calls, meetings or e-mails to stay in touch. For some it can involve asking for a mentor to be assigned by human resources or searching for a second or third mentor.

“A true mentor does two things: believes in a person and has absolutely no feelings of competition” – Sue Pvetta

The most successful mentoring relationships are those in which the mentee takes initiative and truly drives the mentoring partnership. It is important that the mentee helps determine the pace, route and destination of the partnership. This will allow the mentor to offer insights and counsel that are customized to the mentee’s objectives. Moreover, the mentee must realize that the mentor is a guide and not the one responsible for the mentee’s actions. The mentor can only open the doors and introduce the mentee to the right situations. The mentee also needs to be proactive in searching for secondary mentors and other opportunities which will allow the growth and development of their own professional network.

“If you want to be a master, study what the masters have done before you. Learn to do what they have done- have the guts to do it – and you will be a master too” – Jos. J. Charbonneau

Listed are some suggestions on how mentees can best take advantage of the mentoring opportunities they are offered:

- Make time to meet regularly with your mentor(s). Being mentored is an important long-term investment, not just another hassle in your short-term schedule. Be prepared for your meetings and have specific goals and tasks in mind.

- Learn to ask for help or feedback. Clear communication is the cornerstone on which all other factors sit. It is through constructive and empathetic dialogues that relationships can develop, allowing both parties to bring forward their ideas, enter discussions, and maintain professional development. This helps establish clear and well-defined objectives and makes sure that your objectives are realistic given the circumstances.

- Be willing to listen and learn. Mutual trust is dependent upon maintaining confidences. Although difficult, the mentee has to be willing to openly accept criticism and feedback, demonstrating strength and the willingness to grow. The mentee needs to be able to accept and learn from the advice and observations.

- Take advantage of opportunities presented. Part of your professional development should include seminars, speakers, classroom observations, etc. Your mentor may provide guidance on which activities would be most beneficial.
• Be open and honest. This is vital in getting the guidance and assistance you may need and will offer your mentor the assurance that they also can rely on you. Mentees should be consistent and make sure to follow through on commitments.

• Be proactive about your needs. Being proactive is much more than just taking the initiative - it’s about accepting responsibility for your own behaviors (past, present and future). It is about building partnerships based on principles. Being a proactive protégé includes remembering that you must respect your mentor’s time and make the most of it.

• Be a problem solver. When bringing problems to your mentor, you should have possible solutions in mind to foster the development of your own problem-solving skills. While the mentor can provide ideas and feedback, sometimes no one knows your situation better than you.

• Be an active partner in your mentoring relationships. Postdocs need to be able to accept advice and criticism but also to know when to reject some advice. While not all of the advice given by a mentor should be followed blindly, the postdoc should genuinely consider the guidance that is given and, if the advice is not followed, be prepared to explain why. Clarifying expectations will ensure that mentees get the help they need and achieve their mentoring goals.

• No matter what kind of a mentor you have - one who offers little or no help; one who constantly overwhelms you with information; or even a mentor who is an experienced teacher and understands how to work effectively with a postdoc - you will get more out of mentoring if you are proactive in the process.

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