



# HAVE A SUCCESSFUL MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

THIS REPORT FOCUSES ON THE IMPORTANCE  
OF MENTORING IN THE LIFE SCIENCES WHILST  
PROVIDING SOME ADVICE ON BEST PRACTICE

# MENTORING

HAVE A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this SULSA report is to explore the role mentoring and sponsorship plays within the life sciences research community, whilst providing some advice on best practice for having a successful mentoring relationship.

This report has been created to support the career development of SULSA researchers at both the mentoring and mentee level. It is aimed at those who want to find out how to maximise the benefits of a successful mentoring relationship and who:

- Are already a mentor or mentee within their institution and wish to improve upon their current mentoring relationship;
- Wishes to become a mentor or mentee

## 2. What is Mentoring

Mentoring has played a pivotal role in induction, training and support within private, public and voluntary organisation for many years. The various theories and approaches to mentoring schemes mean that people's concepts of mentoring vary considerably. Therefore, to begin with, it is useful to recognise the main characteristics of mentoring (Figure 1).

Mentoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ongoing relationship that can last for a long period of time</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Informal nature; meetings can take place as and when the mentee needs some advice, guidance and support</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Long term and takes a broader view of the person</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mentor is usually more experienced and qualified than the client, often a senior person in the organisation who can pass knowledge, experience and open doors to otherwise out-of-reach opportunities</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus is on career and personal development</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agenda is set by the mentee, with the mentor providing support and guidance to prepare them for future roles</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mentoring revolves more around developing the mentee professionally</li></ul>

**Figure 1.** Summary of mentoring. Source: Adapted by SULSA from Connor and Pokora, Coaching and Mentoring at Work, 2012

There are typically two approaches to mentoring. The first, and more traditional method, is known as the patronage/sponsorship model. This model focuses on the hierarchical relationship between the mentor and mentee with a very senior member of staff mentoring a junior member to 'become like them'. Although used in many situations today, this

approach lacks diversity and leads to the mentee becoming somewhat reliant on their mentor.

The second model, which is encouraged by SULSA, favours the modern idea of mentoring known as the development model. This model focuses on the mentee driving their own career progression by setting the mentoring agenda and taking charge of their own development. The mentor is someone with greater experience and, although typically a grade above the mentee, this relationship is not based on hierarchy.

## 2.1 Benefits of Mentoring

Many renowned professionals attribute their career's success to having a mentor who took an interest in working with them during their career. As such, finding a mentor is one of the most important strategic career decisions you can make. The importance of mentoring is further evident by the numerous benefits it produces (Figure 2).

The Benefits of Mentoring		
For the Mentor	For the Mentee	For the Institution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows the mentor to “give back” to both the institution and the mentee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increases the mentee's self-confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conveys to people within the institution that management is willing to invest in its employees/students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reminds the mentor how to listen actively rather than passively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps the mentee learn to take better control of their own career</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show the outside world that the institution values its employees/students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourages the mentor to share knowledge, which helps increase their self-worth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaches the mentee how to speak up and be heard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fosters a more loyal workforce</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthens the mentor's interpersonal relationship skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educates the mentee on how to accept feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates a positive work environment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaches the mentor about other areas/departments within the institution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves the mentee's interpersonal relationship skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fosters leadership skills in mentors</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps re-energise the mentor's career</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides an important networking contact for the mentee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourages the mentee's growth</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leads to more personal satisfaction on the mentor's behalf</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps the mentee better understand the institutes culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promotes a sense of cooperation and harmony within the institution</li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** The Benefits of Mentoring. Source: Adapted by SULSA from Management Mentors, 2017

## 2.1 Mentoring in the Life Sciences

Mentoring is particularly important in the life sciences sector due to the short supply of jobs available. The Life Science Network reported that despite the fact over 95 % of science PhD students want to stay in academia, only 0.5-1.6 % of them become professors. The exact figure varies on where you live, but none of the statistics are encouraging. This highly competitive environment means that the strategic career planning that goes hand-in-hand with mentoring could give you the extra advantage required to move forward with your career.

Furthermore, due to the pressures of being a successful academic, many researchers find they struggle to maintain a positive work-life balance. A report by Tan-Wilson and Stamp (2015) found that female undergraduates said that if they were to attend a graduate school in STEM, they would have to give up having a family. This is an unfortunate preconception and a reality for some. In a study of men and women who graduated from 1965 to 1990, 32 % of the women and 16 % of the men left science after starting science careers, with the inability of balancing career success with a meaningful family life given as one of the top reasons (Preston, 2004). One of the key ways to overcome this problem is to create a strong support network whilst receiving guidance from those who have gone through similar experiences themselves. This is where mentoring can play a vital role in providing encouragement and support to empower parents.

## 3. The Role of a Mentor

All parties must have a realistic expectation of what to should expect from a mentor and where the boundaries lie. The following table helps to highlight what a mentor will and won't do for a mentee (Figure 3).

<b>What is Expected of a Mentor</b>	<b>What is not Expected of a Mentor</b>
Use experience and wisdom to guide the mentee	Sponsorship (see section 6) such as providing references and helping you pursue new job opportunities
Provide advice, feedback and support	Providing therapy or behaving like the mentee's social worker
Encourage reflection	Coaching (although some similar techniques may be used)

**Figure 3.** The Role of a Mentor. Source: SULSA, 2017

#### 4. How to be an Effective Mentor

Your Institution must take ownership of the mentoring framework and its objectives, and for many of you formal mentoring programmes will either exist or be in planning as the value of them are recognised. If you are unaware of mentoring programmes in your Institution you should contact your local HR department. It is, however, important that both the mentor and mentee take the appropriate steps to ensure they are fulfilling their role to its fullest potential.

A mentor should support, both materially and psychologically, the careers of their mentees whilst appreciating the impact they are going to have on their career. An effective mentor should also possess the following skills:



**Willingness to share skills, knowledge and expertise:** a good mentor appreciates that this is an ongoing requirement of the relationship, and understands the importance of it to guide their mentee to achieve their potential and progress within their role.

**Takes a personal interest in the mentoring relationship:** good mentors do not take their role lightly and are committed to helping their mentees succeed, whilst feeling gratification in doing so. Many mentors appreciate mentoring can also enhance their own career and personal development, and this valuing of their own growth can help to add a personal interest and passion to the relationship.

**Provides helpful feedback:** one of the main responsibilities of a mentor is to provide guidance and effective feedback. This is where the mentee is most likely to grow by identifying their current strengths and weaknesses and learning how to use them in their role. A good mentor will provide their mentee with challenges that will further their professional development

whilst also encouraging them to become more self-aware and reflective. They will also help their mentee address and be more honest about where they might have gone wrong.

**Active listener:** mentors must ensure they are an active, and not passive, listener. They should be fully engaged and reinforce what their mentee is saying by showing nonverbal actions such as eye contact and nodding. They should show real sincerity in what the mentee is saying and ensure they ask questions.

**Open-minded:** a good mentor should approach their relationship with an open mind and try to keep their own thoughts, value system and prejudices aside. They need to open their mind to a new way of thinking.

## 5. How to be an Effective Mentee

To maximise the qualities of an effective mentor, a mentee should possess the following skills:



**Take responsibility for own learning:** a mentee should know exactly what they want to achieve within their role, setting their own objectives and mentoring agenda. A mentee will only get out of the mentoring relationship what they put into it. A mentor has the ability to equip a mentee with the knowledge they possess, but only if the mentee is willing to take responsibility and absorb all the knowledge they can.

**Be realistic:** whilst appreciating the influence a mentor can have on their career, a good mentee must also realise that they are not miracle workers but busy professionals who are willing to invest their time and effort into a mentees career development. As such, a mentee should set attainable yet challenging, goals for the time spent with their mentor. A mentee should also recognise the importance of various development tools and not singly rely on the mentoring relationship to aid in their career growth.



**Open to feedback:** a mentee must be open to the feedback received from their mentor and be willing to look at a situation from another person's perception to gain a more objective viewpoint. Being open to try new things and considering alternative ways to achieve something is one of the biggest values gained via a mentoring relationship.

**Be prepared:** a mentee should be fully prepared and come to each meeting with a prepared agenda. If you have a prepared set of objectives to discuss with your mentor, you are more likely to stay on task and optimise your time together. Being prepared also ensures a mentee is being respectful of their mentor's time and shows appreciation of the time the mentor is volunteering to them.

**Be open and honest:** a mentee must understand and appreciate their own needs and objectives to effectively share them with their mentor. This requires self-reflection and the willingness to be open and honest with their mentor to discuss the areas that may need work.

**Be open-minded:** being open-minded is a two-way quality, so like the mentor, a mentee must approach the relationship with an open mind and try to keep their own prejudices aside whilst opening their mind to a new way of thinking.

## 6. The Importance of Sponsors

Alongside a mentoring programme, SULSA also encourages early career researchers to seek out a sponsor. Sponsors as defined by Catalyst (2017) are advocates in positions of authority who use their influence intentionally to help others advance, while mentors provide advice, feedback and coaching. Although less talked about, sponsors are equally important as they can open the door to an array of opportunities and will have a massive impact on your career trajectory. They are the people that will put you forward for new positions, alert you about job prospects, be your advocate when you are pursuing new opportunities and provide references.

Unlike mentoring, where hierarchy is not a priority, the more senior your sponsor, the quicker you will advance. A sponsoring relationship will usually happen organically via recommendations, work projects, and networking. The Guardian (2013) outline the following top tips for attracting a sponsor:

- Develop a reputation as a respected colleague. Be reliable, flexible and friendly.
- Prepare an elevator speech about current projects you are working on and the value you are adding.
- Manage your career – take the time to evaluate your skills, growth areas and interests. Know where you want to go in the organisation. Ask for feedback and follow it.
- Aim for multiple sponsors with different points of view.
- Keep sponsors up to date with your accomplishments, and thank them for efforts taken.
- Be aware that your actions reflect on you and your sponsor.

## **7. Summary**

To summarise, the positive impact of successful mentoring and sponsorship within the life sciences landscape is undeniable. If those involved in the mentoring relationship can harvest the key qualities and tips mentioned in this report they will be well on their way to a mutually beneficial productive and career enhancing relationship.

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