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voices

#MentorandMe



Finding & Working with a mentor

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Whether you are a member of academic staff with a secure employment contract or more precariously employed as a research associate; a new researcher transitioning in to doctoral study; a member of our professional staff who manage our departments and core facilities or one of the huge range of specialists who contribute their expertise as librarians, academic developers, careers advisors, counsellors, strategic planners, welfare advisors and the hundreds of other essential functions of a university – working with a mentor can give you the opportunity to think, plan, and manage your career route.

We are huge advocates of the value of the coaching and mentoring approach for person-centred development for people who work in universities. From the literature, we see evidence that mentoring provides an opportunity for new university staff to make interpersonal connections, enabling informed and supportive professional development and can enhance the development and profile of under-represented groups in HE. We also know from our own experience across the UK, that a well-designed mentoring programme can support professional learning for people across many different roles and university functions.

In recognition that not all universities have a mentoring programme, and that not all staff and students have the privilege of access to a formalised scheme, (and indeed that some of the best mentoring conversations can happen outside of formal schemes) we offer some guidance below on how you can find yourself a mentor, and how you can set yourself up for success and get the most out of working with them.

Who to choose?

Look for a mentor based on their leadership approach, their people-skills, and their track record of developing others, as well as their specialism and career context. Being 'more senior' does not intrinsically equal being a 'better mentor'. Whilst a good publication track record, a leadership role, or managing a big team are important career markers, make sure their values and world views align with yours too.

More fundamentally, you should ask yourself these basic mentor questions and do not compromise:

1. Will they keep what you say confidential?
2. Will they listen carefully first, before advising or making suggestions?
3. Can they make this partnership about you, not about them?

Mentoring is a specific skill set. Talk to their team, PhD students, or colleagues who know them to get insight into their people development skills.

Then ask yourself whether it is important to have a mentor from a specific culture or gender. Is it important that they have or with a particular experience (e.g. has international experience, has been politically active, has negotiated a career break, has navigated a toxic workplace or working relationship, has overcome barriers or challenges related to belonging to a marginalised group to achieve career success)? It's completely OK to choose your mentor based on these types of career successes too.

Seek challenge as well as validation. You won't have the opportunity to learn anything new if your mentor doesn't offer you different perspectives and support you to evaluate the rationale for your ideas and decisions about the way forward. Think about the appropriate balance of support and challenge, and whether you want that support to be intellectual, contextual or psychological.

So how do you communicate all this to your potential mentor?

What do I say to them to get them to mentor me?

To encourage them to feel motivated to mentor you, they have to see a fit between what you want, and what they have. Tell them briefly: 1. Who you are, 2. Where you're heading in your career, 3. What your upcoming priorities are, and 4. How mentoring will help you get there.

Remember that your idea of what good mentoring is, might be different to theirs. You'll need to set clear expectations for what you're looking for. Let them know what you need; are you looking for advice / to test out your career ideas / an introduction to new networks / challenge and critique / or a space to share your concerns with an empathetic ally. Make the aims for the partnership clear.

You are recruiting a mentor to work with you, your role as a mentee is the active role, not a passive one, acknowledge this and communicate it to your potential recruit. Reassure them that you will be doing the work, it's your development you won't be holding them accountable for your success, expecting them to take any action on your behalf, or expecting a job out of it.

Tell them why you chose them, specifically. Mention the experiences, skills and attributes you observe they have, and how they would fit with your aims for the near future. Think they're great at championing their team, tell them. Think they're excellent at motivating people, tell them.

Think about what do you actually want them to do, specifically? Factors to consider here are the amount of time you'll need from them, any particular timings or deadlines, and how you'd like to meet them – especially if you're using technology to facilitate your meetings. Communicate this, it will make it more likely for you to get a 'yes' from them if the 'project' has been 'scoped'. Put a finite timeframe on it, for example three, one hour-long meetings over six months, – you can always extend the partnership later if it's working well.

Try before you commit! Suggest meeting for a coffee (or another public space) or on Skype in the first instance. Sound each other out, see if your interests, world views and skills match and if the dynamics of the partnership would work.

If they say no, please do respect that and reply graciously. Remember that mentoring is volunteered work and that individuals in minority and marginalised groups e.g. women, BAME staff and students, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, are frequently asked to volunteer their time to support others. Recognise that intersectionality can exacerbate a high demand for unpaid work.

How can I increase the likelihood of it working out?

Being clear at the point of recruitment is a good step, so please do consider all of the above points.

To maximise what you get out of mentoring, think about how you prepare before each meeting: what topics do you want to cover, what planning do you need to do, what problem do you want to solve or what decision do you want to make. During mentoring sessions work together to set expectations and boundaries ([use this free downloadable form to support you with that](#)), be prepared to speak openly (within those boundaries) and be open minded to suggestions. Afterwards, you can decide for yourself how to proceed, and whether to accept any advice or now. It's the role of the mentee to keep in touch, feed-back, follow up and help your mentor to get it right for you, by giving them some feedback after you meet. If it helps, use the following prompts to craft your feedback:

- How useful was the meeting for you, and why?
- What would like to focus on in the next session? What would you like to move away from?
- Did you notice your thoughts changing positively/negatively during the session? What activated this?
- Are you doing/do you plan to try out doing anything differently in the future?

Look out for a classic mentoring error! If you've met, and find you're getting too much 'telling' and not enough listening, please know this is solvable. [Here is a post on expanding on how mentors can develop a repertoire beyond advice](#), and here's one on the [power of listening](#). If you feel it would be well received, share it with your mentor as part of your feedback to them. If it wouldn't be well received – proceed to the step below, and find a new mentor.

You can leave the partnership if it's not what you want.

Choosing and working with a mentor is an important career decision. Choosing the wrong mentor can hinder your career rather than enhance it and so dedicate some time to reflection on how things are going. There is no need to persist with a mentor you'd rather not work with.

If you meet once, maybe twice, and you aren't getting what you need, don't agonise over how to tell them. Simply thank them, and genuinely, for their input. Name something you have achieved as a result of meeting with them. And advise them you are now stepping back to consider what you've learned and prioritise for your next steps.

In our careers we've both had formal mentors and informal mentoring conversations that have helped us grow and develop. Mentoring, if it is a consciously designed alliance, can be a truly beneficial relationship for both parties and we urge you to seek out people who will be only too happy to share their insight, knowledge and experiences – but also to listen to yours.

