

## Finding the Right Mentor & Maintaining the Relationship Through Key Conversations

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*"If you've come to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." – Lilla Watson*

Mentorship matters at any age or stage of career. In medicine, research consistently demonstrates that mentorship plays an important role in both career progression and well-being [1]. The advantages of mentorship are evident by both the perceived impact of wellness in academic medicine in addition to patient outcomes [2, 3]. Notably, both mentors and mentees benefit from the relationship [3, 4]. Through intentional support and communication, mentees and mentors can navigate challenging experiences and celebrate wins.

"How do I find a mentor?" was one of the most common audience questions during a highly rated workshop, entitled *Harnessing Mentoring Relationships for Women*, presented at a recent American College of Physicians Internal Medicine Meeting. While women have reached parity in medical school matriculation for nearly 25 years, the dearth of women leaders, and especially women physicians with intersectional identities, highlights a systemic gap [5].

Of the majority women-identifying audience, 67% ranked the need for mentors as the highest priority, 15% selected sponsors, and 3% chose coaches. We had defined, in brief, that a mentor talks to you, a sponsor talks about you, and that a coach reflects back to you. While it can be challenging to find a mentor who blends experience, wisdom, and humanity, the great irony of this question of "how do I find a mentor?" is that mentors are all around us. Mentors can be older or younger, have variable lived experiences, career tenure, reside in a different zip code, work in traditional and non-traditional fields, and may or may not look like you. This last point may be relevant, especially if you make up one of the less than 7% of physicians in the United States, who identify as Hispanic, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, or multiple races [6]. The authors are aware of the biases, discrimination, and aggressions often faced by underrepresented physicians and trainees in medicine, which contribute to inequitable career environments. The opening quote from Lilla Watson, Australian Aboriginal educator and activist, makes the point emphatically. While individual mentors may help navigate these

spaces, this underscores the need for institutional commitment to effective mentorship [6, 7]. In support, mentors can increase interconnection by aligning with mentees and their values. Likewise, mentees may seek out a variety of mentors to meet critical personal and professional needs, while mentors may engage with mentees at varying levels of intentional involvement.

Through reflection, we invite readers to address the root causes that may prevent finding and maintaining mentor relationships and offer a strategic communication tool for both mentees and mentors. Use of direct, concise, and specific language can help to navigate real and potential conflicts, inherent in any mentoring relationship, and promote well-being.

### How to Find a Mentor

To begin, maximize current relationships for optimal mentorship outcomes by reflecting on the following:

1. What are the specific reasons why I want a mentor (e.g., goal setting, navigation of a specific concern—personal and / or professional)?
2. What do I believe is an ideal mentoring relationship, considering past and present interactions and relationships (e.g. depth of the mentee's concern(s), match with mentor's experience, frequency of meetings)?
3. Which mentor creates a safe space for me to be vulnerable and authentic?
4. Do the positive impacts outweigh possible imperfections of the mentoring relationship?

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## Shared Interests

Interactions with potential mentors are as common as a "good-morning" in the hallway or through brief email updates about clinical rotations, journal articles, or jobs. These simple interactions create opportunities to engage individuals you admire and can foster a mutual interest in mentorship. Additional scenarios include an attending physician, who praised your presentation during patient rounds, nominated you for a committee, or mentioned common experiences in their path to medicine. Such physicians have excellent potential as mentors because they have already invested in your education and training, and value what you bring to the table as a mentee. These simple engagements demonstrate how to make your interests and strengths more visible, as well as how to share aspects of your "origin story" thoughtfully with others.

## Safe Spaces

Psychological safety is a primary component of well-being, and especially critical within a mentor-mentee relationship. This concept emphasizes self-expression without fear of punishment or humiliation for voicing ideas, questions, mistakes, or concerns, and is different from an environment that is simply polite [2, 7]. This consideration may be useful in choosing mentor-mentee relationships that are non-concordant by identity (e.g. race / ethnicity, sex / gender, religion). Thoughtful reflection about the potential mentor can help with this:

1. How does this individual speak about and support others?
2. Are they flexible with new ideas and understanding of mistakes?
3. Would I feel comfortable approaching this person with my own challenges and without fear of ridicule?
4. Do they strive to learn from their own mistakes [8]?

Beginning with keen observation can help you build longitudinal mentoring relationships with psychological safety. Positive, purpose-driven, and team-centric individuals often make wonderful mentors. This might be a mentor who recognizes people by name, prioritizes inclusive and interprofessional engagement, makes time to teach, or reframes negative comments to empower people. These are frequently people you admire and can foster a mutual interest in mentorship.

## Extramural Support

If support for mentoring programs is lacking within your home institution, expand your network through extramural affinity groups, conference attendance, etc. An affinity group is a group joined together by a common interest, identity, or goal [9]. American Medical Women's Association (AMWA), the American College of Physicians (ACP), and National Medical Association (NMA) provide such opportunities to discuss and develop personal and professional interests. With discretionary standards, professional social media platforms can make it easier to find mutual experiences and connect with others. In

short, every interaction can be an opportunity to meet potential mentors.

## Effective Communication

Like all relationships, mentors and mentees are vulnerable to communication glitches. Without mitigation, this can lead to major conflicts [9]. The Effective Followership Algorithm (EFA) was developed through the Veterans Health Administration National Center for Patient Safety to counteract common barriers in communication by promoting concise, direct, and specific language amongst healthcare workers [10]. For successful outcomes, the tool includes this sequence: "What I see, What I am concerned about, What I want [11]."

For open and productive dialogue, use EFA verbatim, opt for a neutral meeting location when feasible (e.g., walk outside side-by-side or meet virtually), and reflect on both verbal and nonverbal communication. Table 1 includes three case-scenarios with application of EFA to navigate key conversations between mentors and mentees.

Table 1: Three Case Scenarios Applying the Effective Followership Algorithm to Navigate Key Mentoring Conversations

Case Scenario	Challenge	Applying EFA Language
Mentor has a career advancing program for mentee.	Mentee feels the program opportunity does not align with priorities.	What I see is that this is an opportunity for great faculty exposure. What I am concerned about is that it does not fit my career goals. What I would like is to take a step back and clarify my personal goals, so together we can find a better match.
My mentor was promoted and has now become my sponsor.	This role changes the mentor's accessibility & mentee's comfort with sharing information.	What I see is that with your promotion, now you both mentor <i>and</i> sponsor me. What I am concerned about is how to decide which topics to disclose to you without reflecting negatively on myself, or introducing a potential conflict of interest. What I would like is your input on this and to request your exclusive 'mentor hat' when we discuss these topics.
I avoid a former mentee who has become adversarial.	I avoid mutual opportunities. Has the window of opportunity to talk it out passed?	What I see is that our relationship seems strained. What I am concerned about is how it impacts ongoing and mutual activities, and I wonder if this is also your experience. What I would like is to have an open discussion with you about what happened and hope that we can move forward with mutual respect and kindness.

Abbreviations:

(AMWA) American Medical Women's Association

(ACP) American College of Physicians

(NMA) National Medical Association

(EFA) Effective Followership Algorithm

## Summary

Consistent with the experiences of the co-authors, mentorship has been integral to promoting well-being at all stages of career progression. Future research may identify the efficacy of standardized tools, like EFA, in enhancing the quality of mentorship communication.

Mentoring relationships that prioritize a foundation of psychological safety promote the professional growth of both the mentor and mentee. As with any relationship, open dialogue, clarification of priorities, and a modicum of grace from both parties will go a long way towards maintaining the mentorship journey.

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