

# What Do You Really Need from a Mentor?

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Previously, **Marty Draper** wrote a column about grantsmanship and encouraged people to identify mentoring opportunities for themselves and for others. Sometimes, it appears that people are more concerned with finding a mentor than identifying and naming the problem that instigated the search! To develop an effective mentoring program (for yourself or someone else), you have to first figure out what exactly it is that you want assistance with. Just as you can't manage a plant disease problem without an accurate diagnosis, you can't expect a mentor to fix unidentified problems for you. Since only you can figure out what is wrong and ultimately you will be the one to fix it, why involve a middleman?

That isn't to say that you shouldn't ask for help, or take advantage of "mentoring programs." There are people available who are volunteering help, at your place of employment and at APS, whether they call themselves a mentor, colleague, coach, or friend (or even none of the above!). But, to make the experience successful for you (and for them), you need to determine what you actually need.

Identifying the problem(s) is really hard work. This cannot be emphasized enough! Recognize that there may be more than one—or even more than one dozen. Is it grant writing? Teaching? Understanding corporate culture? Finding a babysitter? It might be all of these things and more. This will take time and thought, but it is time and thought well spent. Some of the most commonly verbalized needs (in surveys, conversations, you name it) seem to fall under the following categories:

- **Professional Development:** The only thing harder than looking for a job is actually obtaining and keeping one! First there is CV writing, interviewing, and then, that first position. Congratulations! Now you are suddenly confronted with issues involving organization (your office, your lab, your time, your projects, your employees/students), communication (written and oral), decision-making, and leadership.
- **Institutional Navigation:** In order to successfully get things done requires an understanding of the culture in which you operate. Are your colleagues supportive or competitive? Are there written rules? What about unwritten rules? Who are all of these people and what do they want?

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- **Emotional Support:** Transitioning from being a student to having a career is tough; transitioning through your career is tough; life is tough. Even retirement is tough (or so we've seen!). Colleagues and friends both in and out of work are important relationships to develop and an antidote to the stresses we all face in this 24/7/365 world.
- **Project Evaluation:** Some needs are very specific and time dependent, like evaluating grant proposals, submitting a manuscript, and developing a course, and having a sounding board (to encourage good ideas and prevent bad decisions) is helpful. Having a network of people to help you on this provides more than one perspective, and if nothing else, a second set of eyes.
- **Accountability:** There is important and there is urgent. Prioritizing is one of the most difficult tasks we have as humans because there are always conflicting priorities. Developing a system with independent evaluators throughout your career is much better than finding out once per year, or at your tenure-review, that your priorities were not *their* priorities.
- **Self Care:** Yes, you read that right. Most people don't acknowledge this need, but ancient Romans realized long ago that a

healthy mind needs a healthy body. Recent research supports this. Take time to take care of yourself—whether it is a walk or a run; time in the gym, yoga studio, or golf course; arts and crafts, or even a trashy novel to rest your brain. And don't forget to schedule that doctor or dentist appointment you've been putting off! Of all the categories, taking care of the self (mentally, physically, and emotionally) is often overlooked and can lead to breakdowns in all other areas.

Identifying the need(s) is hard—and most people are surprised by their list. Recognize that everyone—everyone—has needs, but that not everyone has the self-awareness to recognize what these needs are or that needs change over time. As such, it is impossible for you (or any one person) to meet all of your needs. Just as we know there are no silver bullets in plant pathology, it is equally unrealistic to expect someone else (including you!) to meet all your needs for you. But, by knowing what your needs are and by recognizing that needs (just like plant pathogens) evolve, you realize that you'll require different tools, tactics, and strategies for managing your career and your life. And in the end, you'll find the best mentor of all—yourself. And, hopefully, a few friends or colleagues along the way. ■