

Navigating Your Network

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As plant pathologists, we are well aware that the world is about relationships. Relationships can exist in many different ways, and as scientists, we take great joys in defining these relationships. Biologically speaking, we often define these relationships as symbiotic, commensal, mutualistic, or parasitic. Symbiosis, a term first used in a biological context by the father of plant pathology, **de Bary**, in 1879, describes an association between different species; this term was previously used to describe people living together in community. Mutualism describes a process where both creatures benefit, compared to commensalism, where one benefits, but the other is not harmed. Finally, parasitism is a term plant pathologists are quite knowledgeable about and which needs no introduction.

Although we are most familiar with these terms in a biological context, we can and often do evaluate our interactions with other people this way, too, which makes the prevailing mentoring paradigm, the guru-adviser model, so interesting. It is a fantastic model, assuming you have the right chemistry between both members. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. In fact, I suspect it rarely happens. Simply stated, most of us never find that one guru. It is a quest akin to a "soul mate"—an idealized person who makes everything right. If you think about it, that is a lot of pressure on one person. This person is expected to assist in the navigation of institution; nurture a fledging research, teaching, and/or extension program; and guide you through a process of evaluation and tenure, expanding your professional networks, all while helping you create work/life balance. And other than the satisfaction of knowing that the guru helped, there isn't much in it for the guru.

In thinking about the guru model, and why I haven't been successful in finding one, I realized that I still can't do these things for myself on a regular and consistent basis without really screwing something up—which is probably why so few of us actually find this person.

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What I've also realized is that there are numerous people, not one, who have helped me throughout my career, and continue to do so. In this way, I have a personal advisory board, and a network of mentors that have helped me develop my career. Developing a network of advisors allows me to take advantage of the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses of my mentors, in effect developing that "perfect guru" as a sum of the best parts.

So, instead of looking for the near-mythical perfect mentor, what about assembling your own personal advisory board or a network? Something that is at worst, commensal, and at best mutualistic? Networking, unlike mentorship, is predicated on mutualism. That established person you may wish to know to help you in your professional network may need your help in navigating new technology. Many people think that they should only network with people at their career level or higher—but learning from younger, less-experienced people will develop some of the strongest and even richest connections you ever have. This "reverse mentoring" can play a critical role in bridging the gap between generations, who often experience significant differences in cultures, work ethics, and mindsets in the workplace. All of these people, regardless of where they are at in their career, and where you are at in your career, can provide you with a sounding board, opportunities, help in understanding expectations at your place of employment, or even "the next great thing."

How can you find a good member of your personal board?

- Find good partners! It isn't just where they are at professionally or even where you are at professionally. It is really about how you interact, your "chemistry."
- Set clear goals for yourself and see if the other person is interested. Remember, sometimes you are Batman, other times you're Robin. And there is still an entire Justice League out there!
- Communicate! Follow up after the meeting, and possibly in a medium that wouldn't be your first choice. Meet again for coffee, lunch, or over a poster session while at the APS Annual Meeting. Call, e-mail, or text. And don't forget social media—"friend" or "follow."
- Be open minded. Different isn't bad. In order to experience anything new, you have to be open to the experience first.

All of us, at one time or another, need some

combination of encouragement, professional development, intellectual communion, a role model, a champion, access to opportunities, feedback, emotional support, and yes, someone to set us straight and reel us in when we fall off the tracks. And we can all be that person to someone else, just not maybe all of the time. That's a lot to ask of any one person. So, instead of looking for that guru, consider how you can develop your network of people. ■