

On quality mentor/mentee relationships in science



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simply blood

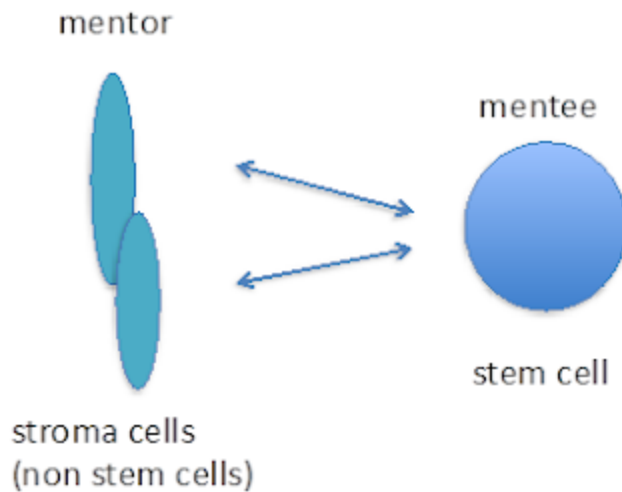
Deconstructing Blood Cell Research
Building the Hematology Community

Is there anything new that another blog could add to this more or less dead horse? Maybe, and if not, at least you can figure that out on your own after reading my little paragraphs. Mentoring and being mentored in science is as important as it is in business. Most scientists are actually small entrepreneurs in a creative setting, acquiring income via selling ideas and generating impact via selling information. A high quality mentor/mentee relationship will help the team to survive, succeed and thus thrive.

Here are 3 points to consider for achieving a successful mentor/mentee relationship:

- It is a mutual relationship that will let both mentor and mentee **shine**.
- It is based on **trust**.
- **Meetings** or interactions need to be regular, but not frequent.

Shine: Finding the right mentor/mentee combination is like dating. It will not always work the first time (although it sometimes does), but usually only after a while. It is also fine to have distinct mentors or mentees for specific aspects of their work, like clinical fellows in research might have clinical and basic research mentors as well as mentees. When choosing a mentor, mentees usually look for a figure in the field that is respected and experienced, one they hope they can learn from, and one who can serve as a role model for aspects of their scientific work. Mentors like to pick mentees who like what they did in the past, what they are doing now, or at least how they do it. That is always rewarding feeling for a mentor.



How does this now result in a strong mutual relationship? Well, good mentors realize that they can also learn a great deal from their mentees: from how they look at the world and science, how they approach new things, or how they might see solutions for old problems with a new, fresh angle. For us stem cell biologists, it is like a stem cell and the niche; only mutual interactions will result in a favorable outcome. So both mentor and mentee need to invest and work towards success of the whole relationship, which will ultimately let the mentor as well as the mentee shine. It is also a good idea to have diverse mentor/mentee relationships both within and outside of your current work setting.

Trust: The real currency of a mentor/mentee relationship is trust. Only then you will be able to fully profit from such a relationship. So in other words, it is great if a mentor and mentee like one another, but at minimum there must be mutual respect. That seems obvious, but sometimes we see the success and the position of the likely mentor, but not yet the person behind that. Or we see a mentee that likes the success of the position we are currently in and is an admirer, but we do yet see the person behind that. Trust allows you to criticize and give direct feedback. It permits you to talk about real problems and real achievements. So figure out right away whether you are willing to trust your mentor or mentee. And, like in real life, sometimes it takes a while until you are ready to go the next step, which is okay. The rewards will be mutual (see above). This frequently also means for the mentor to accept that people do things differently and that there may be multiple roads to success. On the other hand, for the mentees, the mentor's advice might be painful to hear, but is based on a great deal of experience, which will serve the mentee well, so it is important to keep your ears and mind open. A great example of experienced advice this is sometimes hard to swallow is the whole grant writing process.

Meetings: Both, mentor and mentee need to feel that their interactions should be regular, although the preference for the exact frequency might vary. Sometimes it is okay to check in via e-mail, but sometimes there are major roadblocks that require a more in-depth discussion: like should I stay or leave, is this the time to seek novel job opportunities, how do I handle problems with my boss, should I publish this in this form or should I wait?

Mentors are usually more senior with less free time, so it might take some effort on their side to find time for appointments. This is a good test for how committed the mentor is to mentoring. Meetings can also be scheduled around other things you both like to do, like a lunch appointment or an evening at the bar, as long as it is focused on what is going on. Novel forms of communication can also be really helpful, but as always, every now and then a real deal one-on-one is necessary. For all of these facets, it is important to know when things are working and when they are not. If either mentor or mentee feel that their needs are not being met, then move on. Also, even successful mentor/mentee relationships can have happy endings when the time is right to part ways. Communication and trust are key, so keep the conversations moving.



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