This is the eleventh article* in a series designed to help you create an Individual Development Plan (IDP) using myIDP, a new web-based career-planning tool created to help graduate students and postdocs in the sciences define and pursue their career goals. To learn more about myIDP and begin the career-planning process, please visit: http://myIDP.sciencecareers.org

Getting The Mentoring You Need
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Mentoring is a term widely used to describe the relationship between a novice (the protégé) and a more experienced individual (mentor). In the context of PhD training, the protégé is a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow learning from an accomplished mentor. Having a trusted mentor is important at any career stage, but particularly during career transitions. In her classic book¹, Kathy Kram describes the two benefits of mentoring: psychosocial functions (acceptance, confirmation, emotional support, etc.) and career enhancement. It is the second of these that is the focus of this article. Through mentoring, the protégé prepares for more rapid and successful career progression. The literature is replete with studies documenting the value of mentoring in productivity, job success, and career satisfaction.²,³

Getting good mentoring is not a matter of luck. It is a matter of intention and a genuine desire to succeed. The former mayor of New York, Ed Koch, was known for his signature line "how am I doing?" which he asked virtually everyone he came in contact with around the city. The question that you should be asking trusted mentors is "how can I do better?"

Supervisors versus Mentors
You already have a supervisor. In some circles this person is referred to as a principal investigator (PI). If you are a graduate student, this person is formally assigned as your thesis adviser. If you are a postdoctoral fellow, he or she may be known as your mentor, though this is an unfortunate choice of words. This person directs the laboratory in which you work and is responsible for your research performance. You should expect him/her to provide frank and timely feedback on your research, help you to think critically about your science, and guide you with presentations and publications. In many cases this individual will be fully invested in your career progression, but in some cases they will have limited ability and/or interest. Regardless of the situation, you should work with him/her to take best advantage of their expertise.

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Soliciting Guidance

As you use myIDP to create your own plan, you need to be prepared to share selected portions of the plan with your supervisor. If you are concerned about the prospects of discussing career issues with your supervisor, one way to gently introduce this topic would be to have her provide feedback on your skills by completing the skills assessment in myIDP. In the myIDP summary tab under skills assessment, you can download a PDF version of the assessment tool. Here are some tips to facilitate the discussion with your supervisor:

• Make an appointment separate from other lab meetings. This should not be a ten minute add-on to a discussion about your data. It needs to be a discussion focused on your career.
• An environment away from the lab will eliminate distractions.
• Start out on a positive note - “I’ve really enjoyed my last year in the lab. I feel I’ve made great progress on my research project and now I’m beginning to think ahead to the next step in my career.”
• Do not attempt to share your entire IDP. Prepare a concise outline of what you want to discuss. myIDP facilitates this by allowing you to print out selected portions of your IDP.
• Be prepared to negotiate! If your Plan A is to teach science in a liberal arts college, you will need to get comprehensive teaching experience (developing a syllabus, delivering lectures, engaging students in active learning, writing exams, giving grades). As this will inevitably take time away from the laboratory, you need to agree on how the research will get done.

Mentoring is not a magic bullet. Sometimes things go wrong. If you have a problem with your graduate advisor, see a representative of the graduate program, the department chair, or someone in the graduate school administration. If you have a problem with your postdoc supervisor, consider talking to someone in the postdoctoral office or the university ombudsman.

Building a Mentoring Team

It is not reasonable to expect a single person to be an expert in everything you need to learn. You should expect to develop a "mentoring team" consisting of experts in different dimensions of science. As you identify skill areas that need work, you would be best served by seeking out different mentors for different skills. This recommendation sounds like common sense but it is also based on data which reveal that career outcomes are positively related to the number of mentoring relationships.4,5

Extend your mentoring network beyond the bounds of your current department or institution. Identify scientists in other departments who have appropriate expertise and seem approachable. For some issues, people who are one stage beyond where you’re at may provide...
valuable input. At professional meetings, make it a point to get to know people from other universities who have significant overlap with your specialty area. Pay special attention to nonacademic scientists who work in careers with which you are unfamiliar. A broad cohort of mentors can provide you with diverse perspectives and point you to undiscovered resources.

Developing Other Mentoring Relationships

Here are some suggestions on how to develop positive mentoring relationships:

• Clarify your needs before you approach anyone.

• Start by identifying someone with a skill set that you would like to learn. Knowing what you need helps others determine if they have relevant or useful knowledge to share with you. Do you need help with broad issues such as time management or work-life balance or do you want help with more circumscribed topics such as presentation skills or grantwriting?

• Be proactive in making contact with potential mentors.

• An initial conversation is the first step. Don't begin the conversation by asking someone to be your mentor. This relationship may take time to evolve. The initial meeting is just the first step.

• If there is a connection, it can be formalized by agreeing to meet on a regular basis. You need to agree on the purpose of those meetings.

• Be prepared to set the agenda for each meeting. You should take responsibility for raising the issues about which you want feedback.

• Show up for meetings on time and end on time. This shows respect for the mentor.

Good mentoring is an essential building block in constructing a modern scientific career. Invest in yourself and your career by carefully assembling a team of outstanding mentors.

Vineet has just completed his PhD work in immunology and moved to a new institution to get advanced training in cancer immunology. He is excited about all the "toys" in his new lab and the powerful new techniques he can apply to interesting scientific questions. His PI has a long record of success and the lab group is a vibrant and interactive environment. However, Vineet recognizes that excellence in the lab is not sufficient to allow him to achieve his dream of starting his own company based on some of the potential drug targets identified in his research. Without leaving his current position, what can he do to help prepare himself to achieve this dream? He needs to find additional mentors!


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