

# New study finds what makes a good mentor and mentee

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How-to books are full of advice on what makes a good mentor. But what makes a good mentee and what chemistry is needed to make the relationship work?

People being mentored should be open to feedback and be active listeners, according to a new research paper. They should also be respectful of their mentor's time, including being on time and prepared for meetings.

And it helps to follow at least some of their advice.

"Successful mentorship is vital to career success and satisfaction for both [mentors](#) and mentees," said Dr. Sharon Straus, a researcher at St. Michael's Hospital and author of the paper published online in [Academic Medicine](#).

Dr. Straus examined mentor-mentee relationships at two large academic health centres, the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine and the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine, where she is director of the Division of Geriatric Medicine. She said she believes this was the largest qualitative study on mentoring that has been conducted and was unique in including participants from both Canada and the United States.

While her focus was on [teaching hospitals](#), she said many of her findings could apply to other professions.

Her paper identified five key ingredients necessary for a successful mentoring relationship: reciprocity, mutual respect, clear expectations, [personal connections](#) and shared values. Failed relationships were characterized by poor communication, lack of commitment, [personality differences](#), perceived or real competition, [conflicts of interest](#) and the mentor's inexperience.

Faculty members interviewed for her study said mentees need to take their mentors' advice seriously. They don't have to accept every word, but if they ignore most of the advice, it's a fruitless relationship.

Good mentors were said to be honest, trustworthy and active listeners, meaning they were engaged with the mentee during each session, focused on the issues identified by the mentee and helped the mentee set goals. The good ones also had a network of colleagues and collaborators who could open doors for their mentees, help jump-start their careers or just explain how the system works. In addition to providing career advice, they also helped their mentees achieve the elusive work-life balance.

"One of the key challenges for mentors and mentees is a lack of time and participants stated that the effective mentors ensured that they remained accessible to their mentees even if they were located at a distance," Dr. Straus said. "Although they may not be able to meet in person regularly, effective mentors used email and phone contact to ensure accessibility."

Good mentors also warned mentees of potential pitfalls. One mentee described this role as being like a "guardian angel [who] prevents you from hitting yourself when you know something is falling from the sky."

Previous studies have found that effective mentorship produces university faculty who are more productive (including obtaining more

grants and publications than non-mentored colleagues), are promoted more quickly and are more likely to stay at their institutions. Given the importance of mentoring, she recommends training programs focusing on promoting the characteristics of effective mentoring.

But what do you do if the mentoring relationship just isn't working?

Dr. Straus said strategies include using a mentorship facilitator or the department chair as a mediator, implementing a "no-fault divorce" rule whereby either side can end the relationship.

Dr. Straus is also director of knowledge translation at the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute of St. Michael's Hospital. Knowledge translation is the process of incorporating the best available evidence into practice, education and decision-making.

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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