

# Prioritizing mentorship



**Mentorship can be invaluable to a research career, but more guidance is needed to ensure effective mentor–mentee relationships.**

**M**entor–mentee relationships can occur serendipitously or through formal, structured programmes. Either way, there is no doubt that these relationships are important for personal and career development. There are no specific rules around who your mentor should be, but they should provide guidance and support for you to succeed in your career. Several studies have shown that effective mentoring is associated with increased career satisfaction and progression, academic productivity, and retention; the latter being particularly relevant for women and individuals from underrepresented groups<sup>1,2</sup>. These relationships offer mentees opportunities to learn from more experienced individuals without conflicts of interest (that is, not line managers or supervisors), provide space to talk through issues, provide career guidance, or help with broadening access and networks, all of which facilitate successful career development. While they can be particularly valuable for PhD students or postdocs starting positions in a new city or country, mentors play key roles throughout the career trajectory as new challenges arise. What is often overlooked are the benefits afforded to mentors. There is a chance to learn from different points of view, provide time for self-reflection and personal development, and aid the development of skills needed to be a good manager.

While mentoring has many positive implications, it is not always prioritized by institutions and funders. In this issue of *Nature Microbiology*, Michal Elovitz, a physician-scientist and professor in women’s health, **argues** that training and funding is sorely needed to ensure effective mentor–mentee relationships. Elovitz recounts her own experiences of being both a mentee and mentor, as well as the experiences of her peers. What emerges

is a realization that there can be good and bad mentors, but also mentors that inhabit the grey area in between. Mentors may provide professional opportunities but simultaneously fail to consider the hurdles experienced by the mentee due to different lived experiences. Ultimately, these mentoring relationships may do more harm than good. Given that many mentoring relationships develop informally, mentors often lack specific training. Structured mentoring programmes do exist, but their implementation and the level of training involved varies across countries and institutions. Elovitz comments that training is essential to ensure quality, reproducible and effective mentorship, together with specific guidelines and measurable metrics. Perhaps most importantly, mentoring needs funding for this to be achieved and it must be prioritized alongside other academic responsibilities.

So what makes a good mentor? Research using qualitative analyses has identified a set of characteristics demonstrated by effective mentors. Consistent themes include enthusiasm and compassion, the ability to tailor support to each mentee, including consideration of lived experience, making time for regular, high-quality meetings, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to maintain effective communication<sup>3</sup>. Trust is also key. The mentor may be privy to confidential information from the mentee, and so being able to objectively provide support without any conflicts of interest is paramount.

The responsibility of ensuring an effective mentoring relationship also lies with the mentee. Studies have shown that unclear expectations and poor communication at the start of a mentoring relationship can be its greatest downfall<sup>4</sup>. Mentees must take ownership of this relationship, prepare for meetings and direct topics of conversation. It is important to note that one mentor may not be sufficient. Having multiple mentors to cover various topics and experiences is common. Beyond the mentor and mentee, these relationships also need support from other parties including employers and the mentee’s line manager or supervisor.

Whether you are already part of a mentoring partnership, or are looking to become a mentor or mentee, some resources are available with advice for scientists. *Nature* has a **career guide** with first-hand accounts from mentors and mentees, including what to do when your mentoring relationship is no longer serving you<sup>5</sup> and top tips for being an effective mentor<sup>6</sup>. *Nature Immunology* previously published a **set** of opinion pieces from mentors discussing how mentorship can be improved. Here at *Nature Microbiology*, we aim to facilitate mentoring relationships between scientists from underrepresented groups through our ‘Amplifying diverse voices’ **series**<sup>7</sup>. For more than a year, we have partnered with the **Black Microbiologists Association** to publish seven Journal Club articles. Each article is authored by two researchers at different career stages (one junior and one senior) and different institutions, and usually countries. This results in a partnership in which more experienced scientists work with those earlier in their careers to write a non-primary article, together with help from our editorial team, resulting in a publication and an understanding of the editorial process. This has the potential to prompt a longer-term mentoring relationship beyond the Journal Club.

Given the success of this initiative, we aim to expand this opportunity to other underrepresented author groups. We hope that this will facilitate connections between microbiologists across career stages and result in effective mentor–mentee relationships. If you are interested in collaborating with us on this initiative, please get in **touch**.

Published online: 5 February 2024

## References

1. Sim, L. A. et al. *Acad. Psychiatry* **47**, 521–525 (2023).
2. Farkas, A. H., Bonifacino, E., Turner, R., Tilstra, S. A. & Corbelli, J. A. *J. Gen. Intern. Med.* **34**, 1322–1329 (2019).
3. Cho, C. S., Ramanan, R. A. & Feldman, M. D. *Am. J. Med.* **124**, 453–458 (2011).
4. Straus, S. E., Johnson, M. O., Marquez, C. & Feldman, M. D. *Acad. Med.* **88**, 82–89 (2013).
5. Davila, J. S. & Gotian, R. *Nature* <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-00821-8> (2023).
6. Woolston, C. *Nature* <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00604-7> (2022).
7. *Nat. Microbiol.* **7**, 1501–1502 (2022).