

Maximizing Time and Expectations in the Mentor–Mentee Relationship: 10 Tips to Guide Your Journey

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Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.

–Benjamin Franklin

On the road to becoming seasoned child and adolescent psychiatrists, a good goal is to end up in the fast lane. This lane is generally furthest from the entry point and takes several lane changes before becoming a reality. The fast lane is often considered the smoothest, most effective, and the most fun! The goal is not to necessarily drive fast, but to merge into a streamlined lane you know will get you where you need to go.

In this light, a mentor is your co-pilot, your wingman, your passenger. They check your blind spot, gently guide you while you pick up speed to merge, and hopefully leave you with the confidence you need to drive independently. They can tell you to turn on your signal, teach you to use

your mirrors, but most importantly, they can empower you to have confidence in your direction of travel.

For many, Dr. Jack McDermott—or Captain Jack—was the ultimate wingman. He empowered those around him to utilize their talents to reach for their dreams. He made a career of this, really, and inspired many powerhouse leaders in child and adolescent psychiatry to ignore boundaries so that they may embrace their personal and professional callings. While I did not have the pleasure of knowing Dr. McDermott personally, I have benefited from his mentees, who have paid it forward. In a serendipitous manner, I have worked with Drs. Andrés Martin, Michelle Horner, and Stacy Drury—all on separate projects—and each has mentored me in different capacities that have played an integral role

in my development. I am grateful to each of these individuals for their guidance and encouragement and am especially appreciative to Dr. McDermott for catalyzing what seems to be a movement of movers and shakers.

How is it that one word—mentorship—can mean so much to so many? Once you find a suitable mentor, what do you do as a mentee to make this relationship come alive? I remember asking myself these questions over 15 years ago, when I met one of my first mentors, Dr. Lori Altshuler, while an undergraduate at UCLA. She was everything I wanted to be—an accomplished psychiatrist, a caring mother, a well-respected researcher. How was I to make this relationship blossom? I will never forget my first meeting with Dr. Altshuler, who invited me into her corner office and poured me a cup of coffee. While I was anxious and ruminating about the potential career questions she could grill me on, she sat there calmly and asked me about my family, my interests, my dreams. We laughed over funny stories, and she remained present for the entire 60-minute meeting she carved out of her incredibly busy schedule. She asked if she could be my passenger on my professional (and what became personal) journey. Through this relationship with one of my first mentors, I truly understood the profound meaning of the word mentorship.

Here is my advice for maximizing the time and expectations shared in the mentor–mentee relationship to make it meaningful to you (outlined in 10 steps):

1. Identify mutual goals and expectations in the beginning

This conversation is tremendously useful in *selecting* a mentor. Have a frank discussion of expectations from the beginning, identifying how frequently you will meet in person and communicate via email/phone. Will this mentor be someone you can freely email/call? Will they

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be able to meet once a month or once a year? Be sure to keep this discussion two-way, as the best mentor–mentee relationships are reciprocal. You may gain a wealth of knowledge and opportunity while they may be inspired by your enthusiasm and passion for the field.

2. Understand your personal goals

Remember, you are in the driver's seat, and you control the vehicle. Do a personal inventory and identify some important career goals for yourself. Even if you are unsure, having a general idea will be much more helpful in engaging your chosen mentor. Of course, these goals are allowed to be dynamic and changing, but you will be much more satisfied if you have articulated as clear a picture as possible from the beginning.

3. Be honest to your mentor and to yourself

It can be intimidating to work closely with a leader in your field. You may be tempted to agree to commitments/opportunities that may not interest or benefit you. Do not be afraid to speak up and communicate your opinion to your mentor. Be honest. This honesty may lay the foundation for the respect you need to be viewed as their peer someday.

4. Set an agenda (that is not exhaustive)

You do not have to be a drill sergeant, but setting an agenda for each meeting will produce results. This gives you and your mentor time to prepare for each topic so that discussion can be more high-yield. Your mentor will likely have multiple commitments and may not have the time (or interest) to do this. It shows initiative if you can produce a reasonable agenda to be sent to them prior to meeting.

5. Be professional

Show up on time (or early and wait), be respectful of the allotted time, and keep discussions confidential. This commitment to a safe environment will ultimately facilitate brave discussions that may pave the way for bold discoveries. Unwavering commitment to the above will undoubtedly create mutual trust. Perhaps most importantly, remember to be appreciative.

6. Welcome constructive criticism

This is the holy grail of mentoring. This demonstrates that your mentor has taken the time to be thoughtful and trusts that you will welcome targeted comments to areas needing improvement. As hard as it may be to hear, write the comments down, read them again when you are by yourself, and try to find their worth. Listen carefully with the goal of making reasonable adjustments to improve the final product. Sometimes mentors can see pitfalls to which we are blind, as their perspectives are often shaped by years of experience.

7. Good communication

Similar to working on an interdisciplinary team, communication is the backbone of productivity. Check in with your mentor via an agreeable and mutually beneficial form of communication within a reasonable amount of time. Stick to the facts and report back on your progress (or lack thereof). Understand that mentors are often very busy (potentially with other mentees!) and remind them of where you last left off. If you can effectively apprise (ahem, remind) them of progress, this will make their lives easier and allow you to hit the ground running with their guidance.

8. Accountability

This goes both ways. If you commit to a project and set a deadline, do it. Of course, if there is a good reason why this is not possible, refer to #7 and effectively communicate this to your reasonable mentor. Similarly, if your mentor commits to meeting or working on a project with you, it is fair to hold them accountable (respectfully, of course). It is critical that you take ownership of your commitments, especially when they involve professional deadlines.

9. Bridges are not meant to be burned

Should the mentor–mentee relationship go awry, understand that this happens and resist placing too much blame on one particular person or incident. If you have to move on to a different mentor (and you may have many, depending on your interests), please do so in a way that demonstrates integrity, mutual respect, and dignity. If

this becomes challenging to do, understand that there are unbiased, safe, workplace mediators who can help. Please do not hesitate to utilize them for solid advice.

10. Utilize the power of observation

You approached this person to be a mentor for a reason. Something about their professional or personal life appealed to you. Work to identify these qualities, as they often provide some guidance in how you want to live your life. Are they incredibly productive? Do they laugh often and seem to enjoy what they do? Do they model work–life balance well? Be aware of what you observe and make a mental note; sometimes actions speak louder than words.

The profound connection shared between a mentor and mentee can come alive via multiple paths. The 10 steps listed above are meant as an initial guide to help you maximize time and expectations with your chosen mentor. In the end, you want this person to help you merge into your fastest lane, something that may seem challenging to do without experienced eyes. Before you

know it, and if all goes well, you will be able to sit back, relax, and enjoy the wild ride to becoming a seasoned child and adolescent psychiatrist.

In loving memory of Dr. Lori Lynn Altshuler (1957-2015) and Dr. John F. McDermott (1929-2015).

Take Home Summary

- Maximize the time and expectations shared in the mentor–mentee relationship by making it meaningful to you.
- Identify mutual goals and expectations in the beginning, as this sets the pace.
- Practice good, effective, direct communication and welcome the gift of constructive criticism.
- The profound connection between a mentor and mentee can come alive via multiple paths. Try to work with someone who lives the life-style you have always envisioned for yourself.

About the Author

Misty Richards, MD, MS, is a first-year child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at UCLA. She is the former editor-in-chief of the *American Journal of Psychiatry–Residents' Journal* and a current deputy editor of *JAACAP Connect*. She is interested in mood disorders in transitional age youth as well as college mental health.

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