

## How I found a mentor



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Left to right: Jeremy L. Herrmann, MD, Luis F. Alber-ton, MD, and Patrick D. Rudersdorf, MD

### Central Message

For one to have a successful career in the field of cardiothoracic surgery, forming mentor-mentee relationship is critical, and the benefits of this interaction are unlimited.

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Throughout our lives, mentors play essential roles in shaping both our professional careers and our personal lives. Likewise, mentoring is a time-honored pillar of our surgical training paradigms. Dr Loop summarized an effective mentor as someone with high standards of excellence to emulate, “a sponsor, an advisor, and a model.”<sup>1</sup> A mentor is more than a didactic teacher or technician. Our mentors provide us with an example of how to conduct our professional, clinical, and personal lives and help us to accomplish our goals in those arenas. A mentor's role is to cultivate our talents and to improve our weaknesses—and should encourage us in introspection and self-honesty about our talents and abilities. Mentors provide advice that uses seniority and experience. This role extends beyond the formal training time frame and—if we are fortunate—can last a lifetime.

Previous authors have eloquently described the desirable traits and aspects of mentors (Table 1).<sup>1-4</sup> Although these may seem intuitively obvious, it can be difficult to find those who possess all these traits. Furthermore, the impact of a mentor can also vary, from a brief period in a particular career stage to a lifelong connection that evolves through multiple stages. A self-appraisal checklist for mentors that has been offered by Dr Pasque<sup>2</sup> may provide a useful self-reflection tool not only for active mentors but also for those in search of a mentor.

This article is written as a combined effort between an adult cardiac surgeon, a congenital heart surgeon, and a thoracic surgeon as a means of drawing on our personal experiences from different career paths to distill the concepts and methods that we found most useful in our personal searches for mentors. When considering the broader meaning of a mentor, we agreed that we encountered meaningful mentors well before our professional education began, in the form of parents, teachers, coaches, and so on. For the purpose of this article, however, we chose to focus primarily on the mentors who have helped us during our surgical training and current practices. Our aim is to provide readers, particularly those currently in training or their early careers,

a compilation of the methodologies that we have found to be the most effective for establishing our personal successful mentor-mentee relationships.

### FIND COMMONALITIES

In our experience, arbitrarily and randomly assigned relationships do not often lead to effective, long-term mentor-mentee relationships. As with any social relationship, the most meaningful mentor-mentee relationships arise from common interests that promote collegiality and trust. Accordingly, identifying a mentor who shares similar personality traits is usually a good first step. In addition, successful mentor-mentee relationships are based on positive professional attributes of the mentor (eg, technical mastery, clinical acumen) that are also valued by the mentee. Any common interests outside the practice of medicine can further bolster this relationship.

### BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

Understanding your personal, professional, and academic goals provides the foundation for any mentoring relationship regarding your career. This is true at any stage, whether it be in medical school or in early practice. There is no single correct or best pathway, only the path that is best suited to the individual surgeon. Not only does understanding your goals help to identify potential mentors, but the more specifically that these goals are defined, the more effectively a mentor can provide guidance.

Another aspect of this understanding is identifying your knowledge and experience gaps. Because a mentor has climbed the career ladder beyond you, he or she can help

**TABLE 1. Qualities of a successful mentor**

Established clinician/researcher
Model of work-life balance
Willingness to pay back
Seniority and security
Honest appraiser
Trustworthy
Goal setter

supplement your knowledge and experience, which may have been tested only to a limited degree previously. The mentor—as a trailblazer—may be able to smooth the rough areas and lower the mountains for you as you follow. Again, successful mentoring in this regard requires clarity of goals.

### POSITION YOURSELF ACCORDINGLY

Meeting a potential mentor can occur through a wide range of venues, including the ward, the operating room, lectures, and society meetings. These experiences offer the opportunity to evaluate any potential mentors in action through performance of those technical, clinical, or research-related tasks that make them prime examples. Conversely, active participation in these venues as a potential mentee increases your exposure to possible mentors. A mentor needs to be able to see potential in the mentee to develop and maintain a critical level of interest and commitment necessary for effective mentoring.

### BE PERSISTENT AND OWN IT

As with any endeavor, no one cares more about your success than you do. Tsai and Helsen<sup>4</sup> effectively argue that mentees must actively seek out these mentored relationships and “own them.” The onus is on you as a mentee to foster these relationships, though with due respect for your mentors' time. Work hard, be honest, and be diligent with the tasks assigned to you. Mentors may lose interest in training mentees if they feel that their time is not being used effectively, and this can be very challenging in the current era of work hour restrictions.

With time, as training and other career circumstances change, it is crucial to sustain those mentoring connections with periodic updates—both the good and the bad. Not only do mentors appreciate hearing how their mentees are progressing, timely updates can facilitate their guidance. If you are fortunate to find an effective mentor, do not lose sight of this person! Maintaining this relationship allows you, despite your limited experience, to practice medicine as if you have much more experience. This potentially translates into better outcomes for patients.

### UNDERSTAND YOUR CHANGING NEEDS

The values and roles of your mentors may evolve as you progress through training and into various career stages. As

you enter practice after successfully completing formalized training, you likely do not possess all the tools necessary to perform the most complex cases, although the foundational building blocks are in place. It is likely that you will encounter patients with disease pathology you have never seen, but discussing these cases with mentors can overcome this obstacle. The importance of mentors for early career cardiothoracic surgeons thus cannot be overstated. Although formalized training programs provide invaluable technical and clinical exposure, it is not possible during training to encounter every feasible clinical situation that you may face later in your career. Adapting acquired knowledge and skill sets to new situations can be a formidable process, especially for complex cases. In the current era of outcomes and performance monitoring, achieving successful outcomes is even more important. Discussing cases on a regular basis preoperatively to identify certain nuances or potential pitfalls may circumvent potentially bad outcomes, thus further emphasizing the value of learning from others' mistakes and utilizing the mentor's experience.

### BRING SOMETHING TO THE TABLE

Even young graduates should not underestimate their skills. The infusion of new skills and knowledge may be one of the most significant means by which you as a new surgeon can immediately and positively enhance a group or program. For thoracic and adult cardiac surgery, this could involve advanced minimally invasive and robotic techniques. For adult cardiac surgery, advanced wire skills, particularly regarding thoracic endovascular aortic repair and transcatheter aortic valve replacement, may be valuable additions to a group's practice. For congenital cardiac surgery, even different techniques in operative approaches and clinical management of specific lesions may help to diversify a group's clinical repertoire. Finding a mentor with similar interests can be critical to the successful implementation of new techniques or knowledge. Particularly as clinical outcomes become more publicized, it is important to understand the practical feasibility of new techniques and the political climate of an institution, which can be difficult to do early in practice. An effective mentor can be a tremendous resource for guidance and assistance to enhance the success of such endeavors while possibly lessening exposure risk for the mentee.

### BE HUMBLE AND ACCEPT CRITICISM

A key role of an effective mentor is to identify a mentee's weaknesses and to improve on them. Conversely, accepting criticism and working to improve yourself are key to your self-growth at any stage of career development, and these require a certain degree of humility balanced with growing confidence and skill. In an extreme situation, such as when a poor clinical outcome occurs and a mentor provides political coverage, it is even more essential to extract any

constructive and honest criticism from the mentor while maintaining an appropriate level of humility.

## CONCLUSIONS

Effective mentors can be key to a successful surgical career, and the lack thereof can present additional challenges as well as risk to the trainee or young surgeon. A successful mentor-mentee relationship requires honesty and diligence on your part as a mentee, particularly as you progress through training and into clinical practice. The benefits, though, can be invaluable to both parties. Having a mentor

by your side will ease the journey. More than a simple teacher or coach, an effective mentor will serve as a friend and confidant who will derive extraordinary satisfaction in helping you do what is right for patients.

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