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Mentoring the Next Generation of Health Professionals: A Mentor-the-Mentor Approach

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Abstract

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Keywords

Mentor-the-Mentor, Interdisciplinary, Research Team, Mentor, Mentorship

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Mentoring the Next Generation of Health Professionals: A *Mentor-the-Mentor* Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this commentary is to share team-based mentoring strategies used for successful interdisciplinary research team productivity and sustainability. This commentary lists and describes the top ten considerations for building a productive *mentor-the-mentor* approach, inspired by the train-the-trainer method. The approach promotes reciprocal training and individualized experiences, while producing positive professional and personal outcomes. We pinpoint how relationship-building rooted in passion and clear communication, explicit expectations and regular celebrations, and routine paired with a bit of play enhances productivity and encourages future health professionals to emerge as leaders in the field.

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Mentoring is a primary role in academia; training students and budding scholars, advising colleagues, guiding collaborative teams, and beyond—mentoring is intertwined through all academic responsibilities and is likely an essential component of annual review. Superior mentoring is vital for productive team-based health behavior research and quality workforce development. Building the next generation of productive scholars, practitioners, and activists is not solely reliant on academic and field experience, but also on quality individual development through mentoring. We propose a mentoring approach built using a *train-the-trainer* model, which has also been operationalized as *pyramidal training* (Page, Iwata, & Reid, 1982) and *training of trainers* (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), 2018). Its primary purpose is to equip individuals with knowledge and skills so they can continue to teach and guide others, in a sort of top-down fashion. This method is often used in health contexts, as it is ideal for achieving long-lasting and scaled-up community health impacts and health behavior changes (Bell-Scriber & Morton, 2009; Ersek, Kraybill, & Hansen, 2006; Levine et al., 2007; Yarber et al., 2015).

Given the *train-the-trainer* benefits in these settings, a similar approach offers opportunities for strengthening mentorship through building mentee competencies and translating mentorship skills to those who will scale up the health workforce. This *mentor-the-mentor* approach describes a multi-pronged method to: 1) build collaborative team-based, research-related proficiencies; 2) foster an environment where the primary mentor (e.g., faculty member) mentors senior mentees (e.g., postdoctoral fellows, doctoral students), who then mentor junior mentees (e.g., masters and undergraduate students); and 3) enhance interpersonal skills to achieve enduring mentor/mentee relationships across all levels. In reflecting on our *mentor-the-mentor* approach, we have synthesized our process into a ten-step system. If you are ready to take your collaborative research team to the next level, consider the following steps when implementing a *mentor-the-mentor* approach.

Ten Steps to Implementing a *Mentor-the-Mentor* Approach

1. Mentor with passion: The golden rule for developing a *mentor-the-mentor* approach: you must be passionate about mentoring. Not everyone was born with all essential skills needed to be a passionate and quality mentor. Mentoring requires daily time and attention, perpetual skill building, and timely evaluation. A passion for mentoring might mean showcasing others' accomplishments before your own, demonstrating flexibility in working hours to support mentee needs, or genuinely displaying your interest in others' development. Passionate mentors inspire, motivate, and empathize. They are committed, confident, and nurturing. A passionate mentor uses their skills to promote professional and personal growth and opportunity. Passion is contagious—highlighting it will result in valuable reciprocal relationships, a pay-it-forward mentality, and long-lasting commitment. This facilitates strong work ethic and commitment to research agendas and deadlines, boosting efficiency in a larger team where each member can continue to feel excited and be involved in projects.

2. Mentor-the-mentor: Mentoring is the cornerstone of high-functioning research teams. Mentors who lead a team provide valuable research opportunities; however, they can also leverage their strengths via a *mentor-the-mentor* approach. Our approach includes the primary mentor (i.e., professor) who directly mentors senior members (i.e., doctoral students), who then directly mentor junior team members (i.e., masters and undergraduate students). The primary mentor remains engaged with all team members, but direct mentorship roles differ depending on team member level. Utilizing this approach enhances mentor/mentee relationships, supports mentoring skill development among senior members, and shares the workload for meaningful engagement without burnout, improving productivity and allowing primary mentors to gauge continued interest and commitment among senior and junior members. Selecting the perfect mentor/mentee pairs is essential to this approach; our team utilizes strengths and personality assessments, individual goals and interest surveys, and schedule availability to create optimal pairs. Further, we also encourage recruiting mentees across health-related disciplines to build a diverse, interdisciplinary team with a holistic approach to health research and practice. They can provide insight from their respective disciplines, which creates stronger and more impactful research and products. The primary mentor stays actively engaged through direct mentoring of senior-level members, conducting timely evaluations of all members, and facilitating full team meetings. Through this approach, workload is shared, outputs are maximized, and relationships are strengthened.

3. Lay the groundwork: Quality mentoring is not built in a day—it requires planning, foundation, and structure. Before beginning your *mentor-the-mentor* journey, you must fully conceptualize your mission, vision, and values. Incorporating mentorship into weekly tasks and short- and long-term goals establishes this as a critical aspect of organizational culture. This necessitates goal-setting that is clear and driven, including how to select mentees, what their roles and responsibilities will be, and how they can be supported in their endeavors. Institutionalizing in-house weekly research hours for all members ensures you will achieve the facetime needed to maintain engagement and assure high-quality work. This ensures research team members are efficiently producing research and writing contributions. Authorship opportunities provide a significant benefit to deserving mentees; expectations should be delineated, discussed, and documented early on. These procedures facilitate shared

understanding, reduced confusion, and research experience success. Context changes, however, so structure is necessary, but should be flexible enough to incorporate shifting needs and personalities, as well as to improve sustainability, innovation, and progress.

4. Give actionable and timely feedback: Our approach is supported through routine primary mentor and senior team member meetings to discuss junior team member development, task management, and upcoming goals and deadlines. Meetings include roleplaying and talking through mentoring best practices, such as how to communicate with mentees, promote productivity, develop strong relationships, and approach challenging situations. Addressing challenges includes setting up one-on-one (i.e., primary mentor/junior mentee or senior mentor/junior mentor) or two-on-one meetings (where both the primary and senior mentee meet with the junior mentee) to reiterate research team responsibilities and identify strategies for improvement, including alternative deadlines, frequent face-to-face feedback, and reestablished accountability. Addressing issues as they happen ensures mentees receive the support they need, without sacrificing team productivity, especially in a larger research team setting where decreased face-to-face interaction could allow some to avoid addressing issues affecting their productivity. Using actionable feedback to develop senior member mentorship skills to approach, address, and support junior member issues and tasks is a critical aspect to improving and reinforcing the *mentor-the-mentor* approach and building a culture of accountability and high-quality work output.

5. Develop a personalized approach: Successful mentoring relationships transcend the task at hand. A quality *mentor-the-mentor* program is built upon understanding mentees as people and supporting their endeavors outside the research environment. Suppose your mentee is an aspiring nurse and expresses interest in attending a nursing conference to learn and network. As their mentor, you could assist them in applying for travel grant funding and implement networking skill development into an upcoming one-on-one or team meeting. This is one way to extend your support and personalize your role as a mentor, while also teaching reciprocal skills that can be applied within your team enhancing team productivity, as those skills may manifest in other aspects of the research team environment (e.g., taking the lead on a paper or data analysis). Empathy is, arguably, the most important element to a personalized mentor-mentee relationship. Life happens, school happens, work happens. Ultimately, deadlines can be missed, resulting in incomplete tasks. Before accusing or making assumptions, empathize—ask your mentee how they are doing or how they are balancing their responsibilities. Let them know you are supportive and understanding. Work together to find a reasonable solution, meeting both of your goals and needs, while reinforcing your communication and deadline expectations. Thus, mentees feel understood and can continue working toward the predetermined goal, perhaps at a different pace, rather than leaving a project or the research team, which can delay productivity. This keeps mentees accountable to their goals and mentors accountable to being attuned to ensure research team progress.

6. Curate the perfect pairings: A primary consideration when selecting research team members is often dependent upon fit, funding, and/or availability. For a *mentor-the-mentor* approach, primary mentors should operationalize “fit” by matching senior mentor/junior mentee pairings by individual personality attributes, academic and personal interests, and optimal working styles. Having a range of personality types within your team is ideal for productive

team-based research—this fosters productivity and relationship quality. While an overlap in academic interests is generally a given, commonalities in personal interests also play a role in pairing compatibility. We find working styles exist along a spectrum and vary across tasks and time, with *ponderers* found at one end and *tacklers* at the other. When faced with a task, *ponderers* need time to internalize, strategize, and organize before acting, often resulting in perceived procrastination. *Tacklers* are fast-paced, timely task approachers, sometimes hindering attention to detail or overtaking projects. A successful mentor-mentee pair should encompass the best of these features, working diligently to supplement the downfalls. Regardless of the pairing method, by understanding how each team member works best, curating perfect pairings can increase productivity, yield high retention rates, and improve your team's overall dynamic.

7. Teach transferrable skills: Skills involved in a research team *mentor-the-mentor* approach, such as empowered leadership, individual and team teaching, and genuine empathy, can transfer to mentoring in other arenas. The environment you create as a primary mentor does not solely stay within your team or lab space. When you build a successful team, chances are your mentees will talk about it, which means others are hearing about it (this serves as an exceptional recruitment tool to obtain future research team mentees). Strong mentorship is a transferable skill that can lead to professional success in other contexts, such as: spearheading community projects, developing innovative study abroad programs, or being appointed to leadership positions. By teaching senior members through a *mentor-the-mentor* approach, primary mentors contribute to the cultivation of young leaders who are extensions of themselves. Fostering these mentoring skills among mentees can yield an admired leader, sought-after manager, and esteemed advisor.

8. Work hard, play harder: A common attribute we search for in potential mentees is quality work ethic; however, hard workers can quickly become fatigued without work/life balance. One key to optimal team productivity is to provide opportunities for your team to *play*. Some examples from our research team include: a Labsgiving (a play on Thanksgiving) potluck event every November, one cultural development field trip per semester (e.g., a show in Chicago or a lecture event in Indianapolis), and regularly scheduled mentor/mentee meetings outside of the lab (e.g., coffee shop or park). These opportunities humanize our team, foster deep interpersonal relationships and a sense of community, and, ultimately, encourage productivity and intrinsic motivation in completing research and collaborative tasks. We also celebrate—when team members experience professional and personal successes, we recognize them for their efforts through group text, direct email, or lab meeting shout outs. We suggest including a *kudos* section in all team agendas to regularly highlight individual and team wins. Doing so enhances team dynamics and simply makes people feel good. So, go ahead—start your team meeting with an engaging icebreaker, take your team outside of your lab walls, decorate cookies together—the work brought you together, the play keeps you together.

9. Learn from your mishaps: Even the best mentors can experience mentoring mishaps. Whether it is not being clear with communication, responding badly to a mix-up, or dropping the ball on an important task, not every moment of mentoring is easy. Good mentors reflect on their blunders, learn from them, and find ways to improve for the future to avoid repeat mistakes and ensure consistent team productivity. Some ways we have improved are through detailing goals and expectations with hard and soft deadlines, regularly checking in with mentees with specific

questions, and always acknowledging that *mentors are people too*—they make mistakes. However, sometimes mentoring relationships should not be pursued. Some mentors, though well-meaning, have difficulty relating to mentees and empathizing with their experiences. And, some mentees may not have the ability, interest, or time to commit to a rigorous research team. Understanding your ability to maintain healthy, mutually-beneficial mentor/mentee relationships within your research team is essential to prevent crashing and burning.

10. Know your limits: A good research mentor with a productive agenda will be desired by many. However, the *mentor-the-mentor* approach is about quality, not quantity. Though we strive to maintain productivity, we also commit to our capacity to mentor, including giving the time necessary to foster strong, individualized mentor-mentee relationships. As such, we are mindful to not outgrow our capacity by prioritizing and preserving the *mentor-the-mentor* experience, which is the hallmark of our research team. This necessitates saying *no* to prospective senior and/or junior members, despite a continued desire to—as some would say—open a “research shelter” to any and all individuals seeking experiences and mentorship. Strategies we utilize include promptly informing applicants of our decision, using compassionate language, and providing actionable feedback delineating our decision. Though difficult, this ensures that no one, neither a primary nor a senior mentor, is extending beyond their mentorship capabilities, potentially threatening research team productivity.

Conclusions

This commentary provides practical approaches to team-based mentoring using a *mentor-the-mentor* approach. Our strategies for successful *mentor-the-mentor* implementation include emphasizing clear structure and organization, delineating member roles and responsibilities, and creating productive pairings. Additionally, mentorship must move beyond engagement during research tasks, and incorporate team- and relationship-building on a personal level via varied activities. This enhances trust and openness, allowing mentors and mentees to build stronger, more meaningful relationships. Mentorship styles vary depending on group dynamics, team goals, and organizational system. Establishing a *mentor-the-mentor* program can foster leadership at all levels, creating a culture of self-sufficiency, accountability, and desire to lead and mentor in health-related fields and beyond.

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