My lessons in mentorship

When I started formally mentoring undergraduate and graduate students almost 2 years ago, I was excited about the opportunity to help young scientists grow, but I was also nervous about the responsibility. As a postdoc, I was teaching a class in which students could conduct independent research projects under my guidance, and I wanted to make sure that my students would have positive experiences and develop strong foundations for their careers. I needed to come up with a mentorship philosophy. My approach was to reflect on my own experiences, positive and negative, as a mentee.

One of my early mentoring lessons came as I worked toward my master’s degree. I hoped to attend conferences and publish, but I didn’t communicate these goals to my adviser. This was partly because I had just immigrated to the United States from a Hindu culture, where people earn things through good deeds rather than by asking for them. I focused on my work, hoping that my adviser would notice my efforts and present opportunities to me. It didn’t work out that way. Now, as a mentor myself, my first step is always to have conversations with my mentees to understand their goals.

A second lesson came from my Ph.D. adviser, who always let me know that my family mattered as much as my career did. When my father underwent quadruple bypass surgery, for example, my adviser made it clear that I should take as much time as I needed before trying to be productive in the laboratory again. This was just one of many instances when he showed that he valued my personal life and emotional well-being, which strengthened our bond and enhanced our working relationship. His supportive attitude also made me care more about my research and encouraged me to work harder. I take this lesson forward with my mentees by showing them that I really care about them personally, not just about the progress of their work.

The final element of my mentorship philosophy came recently, from my postdoctoral experience. I had been focused on my own goals—including getting pilot data for my independent research project, teaching, and mentoring—and I wasn’t paying attention to my adviser’s expectations for my work. When I noticed that my relationship with him was getting strained and that he was not fully on board with my career development plans, I set up a meeting for us to discuss our expectations and goals, and we developed a work plan that will allow both of us to achieve our objectives. Now, as a mentor, I make a point of establishing mutually beneficial common goals with my mentees and discussing the steps my students must take to fulfill those goals.

Implementing this philosophy can be challenging. It takes more time and effort for both parties than a more hands-off mentoring relationship would. But this is a long-term investment that will result in fruitful and rewarding relationships. The mentor needs to foster clear communication about goals and ensure that both parties value each other as individuals.

As a mentor, the onus is on me, because it is not always in a mentee’s capability to know how to establish a productive relationship with their mentor. So, I invite my students to my house and feed them home-cooked meals to promote open communication and understand their goals and dreams. I want them to feel cared for, not just valued for their work.

As I gain experience, both as a mentee and as a mentor, I will continue to optimize my approach, remembering that someone else’s hopes are at stake. Sometimes a mentor helps a mentee dream. Sometimes a mentor gives a mentee confidence to believe in their dreams. Sometimes a mentor helps a mentee fulfill their dream. I hope to use my mentorship philosophy to turn the dreams of many into realities.

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