

# The Mentoring Triad: Mentee, Mentor, and Environment



In Greek mythology Odysseus entrusted his household and son Telemachus to Mentor when he left to fight the Trojans. In Odysseus' absence, Mentor assumed the responsibility of mentoring Telemachus until he matured and was able to think and act independently<sup>1</sup>. From this relationship came the basis of mentoring as we know it today.

Just as the Greek myth focuses on the relationship of Mentor and Telemachus, our concept of mentoring focuses on the relationship that evolves as 2 individuals work towards promoting the development of the less experienced. However, it is important to note that in the myth, an environment existed that created the need for and facilitated the relationship between Mentor and Telemachus. Thus mentoring is best thought of as a triad of interactions between the mentor, mentee, and environment<sup>2</sup>. A healthy mentoring relationship requires contributions from and yields benefits for all three.

In recent years mentoring programs have proliferated in academic institutions and physician organizations, with programs provided on-site and at a distance<sup>2-5</sup>. These programs all facilitate the initiation of mentoring relationships. Some simply introduce potential mentors and mentees while others enhance the environment by providing recognition for mentoring and resources to assist mentors and mentees in their roles. An environment that supports mentoring also reaps the benefits of high morale, improved retention rates, and increased productivity<sup>2,6,7</sup>.

Within an appropriate environment, a mentor and mentee can have a powerful relationship, with each gaining in the process. However, Greek mythology continues to influence most of us. As was the case for Mentor and Telemachus, the literature still tends to emphasize the role of the more experienced in the relationship as providing guidance and support for a junior colleague<sup>2,4,7-9</sup>.

As a trusted advisor, the mentor contributes to the mentee's development by taking on 4 roles<sup>2,4,7-10</sup>: (1) the coach provides advice, shows how to get things done, and provides feedback that identifies strengths and areas for improvement; (2) the facilitator creates opportunities for trying new things and using learned skills, delegates authority and gives permission, and advocates on behalf of the mentee; (3) the counselor helps the mentee envision goals

and move toward achieving them, encourages exploration of options, explores consequences of decisions, and provides respectful listening; and (4) the networker assists in establishing productive professional networks and connects the mentee with other potential mentors and collaborators.

Mentors are successful in these roles when they provide high levels of both challenge and support to their mentees. In doing so, mentees develop their own vision of where they wish to be and what they wish to accomplish in the future<sup>11</sup>. Note that it is not the job of a mentor to have answers for all of the mentee's questions. Rather, the mentor strives to provide information and direction, allowing the mentee to develop their own problem solving and decision-making skills<sup>2,8</sup>. A successful mentor must be trustworthy and be gratified by the success of their mentee. Moreover, the mentor must be willing and able to support the mentee's choices, even if they are different from their own. A classic example of this situation occurs when a clinical investigator mentors a resident who has shown potential and interest in becoming a researcher but ultimately decides to pursue a community-based rheumatology practice.

Often overlooked when considering mentoring are the benefits to the mentor, which may include acquiring respect, achieving recognition, acquiring a productive collaborator, and feeling needed<sup>12,13</sup>. The mentor may also gain a sense of personal satisfaction and pride in contributing to the growth and development of a mentee who will function independently within a specific community in the future. The mentor takes satisfaction from contributing to this larger community of practice, especially when they readily identify with that community themselves<sup>12,13</sup>. This community may be as broad as one's nation, or as specific as a focused area of research or clinical practice. Thus, our resident who chose a community-based practice contributes to the broader rheumatology community, as opposed to the more focused community of clinical investigators: still a source of satisfaction for the mentor.

Just as the mentor can take steps to ensure a mentee gains from a mentoring relationship, the mentee must also assume a level of accountability for their interactions with the mentor. Given the success of Telemachus, we can only assume that he was a good mentee. Mentee behaviors that have been

associated with successful mentoring relationships<sup>9,10,13,14</sup> fall into 3 general categories: (1) having respect for and interest in the relationship and their mentor; seriousness in the relationship; interest in getting to know their mentor; being honest; having respect for the mentor's time and experience; and being flexible when unforeseen circumstances arise. (2) Being a willing recipient who assumes responsibility for their own development; being open and willing to learn; taking advantage of opportunities provided; having realistic expectations of the mentor and not expecting their mentor to solve all of their problems; consulting with their mentor regarding difficult decisions; and achieving to the best of their ability. (3) Taking responsibility for ensuring the mentor benefits from the relationship; showing gratitude; sharing their expertise with their mentor; assisting their mentor; supporting their mentor in public; providing their mentor with feedback; and being a role model and mentor for those junior to them.

One might think that if a mentor and mentee understand and agree to fulfill the roles outlined above, a successful mentoring relationship will automatically develop. However, mentoring relationships are like any other: it often takes several tries to find the right fit; arranged relationships may work very well; a fortuitous introduction can result in a longstanding relationship; what appears to initially be a good fit may not work out well; the person we initially declined to meet may turn out to be appropriate; sometimes the person we are looking for is beside us but we are blind to them. While some prefer same gender matches, diverse pairings can also be successful<sup>10,15</sup>. There is no set formula that works for every mentor and mentee and one failed mentoring relationship does not mean the mentor and mentee will not be successful in another pairing<sup>2,6,8,15</sup>.

How, you might ask, does one find potential mentors when they appear to be in such short supply? In addition to taking advantage of established mentoring programs there are many opportunities to engage a mentor informally<sup>6,10,14,16</sup>. Consider senior colleagues whom you respect; ask colleagues for suggestions and/or introductions; attend events where mentors might be found. Most importantly, when you see someone you would like to learn from, introduce yourself and ask for guidance. Keep the initial requests of a mentor focused; most colleagues, no matter how busy or important they may seem to you, will be willing and flattered to respond to those requests and ultimately be your mentor. As a mentor, make yourself available by consciously giving advice and being aware of your role modeling to others.

Once introduced either formally or informally, a mentoring relationship develops in various ways. Some evolve into a collegial relationship and occasionally even a friendship. However, it is not a requirement that a mentor and mentee become friends to have a productive relationship<sup>1,8,16</sup>. Mentees are particularly appreciative of their mentoring relationships, consistently identifying their interactions with

a mentor as being more helpful to their development than mentors perceived them to be<sup>3</sup>. Mentees report the value of the challenge and support provided by their mentors, particularly during transition periods such as at the start of a training program, when establishing a career or new professional role, and at times of career and personal change<sup>3,6,8</sup>.

A successful mentoring relationship requires, at a minimum, a 2-way flow of kindness and respect in an environment that allows the relationship to develop. Expectations of both parties must also be aligned and the rules of professional etiquette must be applied to mentoring relationships as with all others<sup>8,13</sup>. A mentoring relationship will be damaged and perhaps even destroyed by any of the following: failure to respect each other's goals; failure to promote/support one another; expecting the other to be an image of oneself; taking credit for the other's work; inappropriate praise or criticism; unresolved conflicts; expecting the other to always defer; fostering a selective agenda for one's personal benefit; and boundary violations, including physical intimacy.

Ultimately, the goal of any mentoring relationship is for the mentee to develop a level of independence that allows them to carry on with their activities without the direction of the mentor. The strongest affiliations comprise a mentee and mentor who both make contributions to and take reward from the relationship, interacting in a supportive environment. As with other significant relationships, finding the ultimate match may require a little trial and error and even a little luck. But when the right match is found the benefits to all involved could be as significant as those realized by Mentor, Telemachus, and their community.

Take a few minutes to consider how you can contribute to the future of Rheumatology by being involved in a mentoring relationship. Consider mentoring a less experienced colleague in setting up their rheumatology practice, getting involved in arthritis research, or getting their first paper published. Consider asking someone you admire to advise you as you try to balance career and family, get involved in medical education, or seek academic promotion. These are just some examples of how each of you can share and gain from mentoring relationships while also contributing to the strength of the rheumatology community.

**MERIDITH B. MARKS**, MD, MEd, FRCPC,  
Associate Professor of Medicine,  
Assistant Dean, Professional Affairs,  
Faculty of Medicine, University of Ottawa,  
451 Smyth Road,  
Ottawa, ON K1H 8M5;

**ROSE GOLDSTEIN**, MD, CM, FRCPC,  
Professor of Medicine,  
Vice Dean, Academic Affairs,  
Faculty of Medicine, University of Ottawa.

*Address reprint requests to Dr. Marks.  
E-mail: meridith.marks@uottawa.ca*

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