

5 Ways to Engage with Your Mentor

As a mentee, the goal is to connect with your mentor and learn and grow from their mentorship. Ask questions, stay connected and eventually build a working relationship that will benefit your personal and academic career.

1. Getting To Know Your Mentor

Not every mentorship relationship is the same, and the key to getting the most out of your relationship with your mentor is by building that relationship. Establishing common passions and values through conversations with your mentor, as well as participating in the relationship, are the best ways to grow professionally.

Finding Commonalities:

- Ask what your mentor is passionate about in the field of biological sciences. How did they get into the field? What do you have in common outside of biological sciences? What stories do they have that you could learn from or enjoy?
- **Prompting Sentences:** “What motivated or inspired you to go into this field?” or “What do you like most about your job?” or “Besides your job, what do you do on your free time?”.

Throughout your Mentorship:

- Ask your mentor’s opinion on things, as well as question your own misconceptions. In a mentoring relationship, the only “wrong” answer is inaction. Actively participating in the mentor/mentee relationship and behaving as though you are future-colleagues is the best way to learn and grow.
- **Prompting Sentences:** “This week I really struggled with...” or “I am having a hard time with working with...” or “I had a question about this component of your job...”.

Tip: Once paired with your mentor, reach out via email to introduce yourself, connect, and set up your first in-person meeting.

2. Personal Experience

No matter how many colleagues you work with or students you study with, it is important to remember that each one of them is an individual, who had their own journey – including your mentor. Their motivations and backstory may open your mind to an opportunity that you may not have known about otherwise, which can help you choose the career path that suits you best.

Knowing your Mentor's Story:

- Ask about your mentor's reason for joining their field. Reflect on their journey and look to your own personal career path and identify your motivations and goals.
- Knowing where your mentor came from is important, but so is knowing where they're heading. Discuss positions and projects that they will be able to work on because of their previous experience and take note of how they got to that point.
- Learning more about the people your mentor knows who have succeeded or changed fields gives you a secondhand account of what to do, look for, and avoid early in your career.
- **Prompting Sentences:** "Do you have any long term goals for your time in this field?" or "What led you to be at this point?" or "Did you struggle to get where you are now?"

3. Opportunities To Learn

Right now, the largest part of your life is most likely comprised of your studies. Addressing how your studies relate to your mentor's work, what specific information they wish they had learned more thoroughly as a student, and asking them for constructive feedback on your past work are great ways to connect the material and transition to knowing which skills will make a difference after graduation.

Gaining Feedback:

- Ask for your mentor's constructive feedback offering the opportunity to improve your work in the future. Focus on your critical listening skills as you apply the lessons your mentor gives you.
- **Prompting Sentences:** "How do you think I did on this test/project?" or "Did you think my response was appropriate when dealing with..."

Insight on Skills in the Workplace:

- Talk about examples of how you think your work translates to industry, or ideas you have covered and developed through coursework, group projects, or extracurricular activities which may provide insight into what you want to accomplish during your career.
- Prompting Sentences: “How would my time doing ____ skill be transferrable to ____ field...” or “What skills should I develop in order to do well in my field?”.

4. Real-World Application

Once you have amassed the knowledge you need in order to receive your degree, you're going to need to harness it in the real world. Discussing problems the industry faces, common misconceptions of people entering the field (or even those already in the field), and the collaborative process with other departments will give your mentor a chance to show you what your career path might require after graduation.

Preparing for the Workplace:

- Have conversations about how your mentor's field is developing or the problems that their industry faces. This will open doors to conversations about future solutions where you can both offer opinions and recommendations for improvement.
- Talk about the misconceptions associated with the field. Ask questions and engage to ensure you pinpoint the area of study/industry most well-suited to your interests. Your mentor likely knows a lot about the general field and can introduce you to new areas of focus based on the conversations you have together.
- Learning about how your mentor's department collaborates with adjacent departments will give you a better understanding of the breadth of career opportunities available within the same general field.
- Prompting Sentences: “Are there areas of limitations in your field and what your company is facing now?” or “What other areas could ____ field expand on in order to be successful?” or “Is it true that _____?”.

5. Networking

Networking is a powerful tool for anyone, at any level of their professional career, and learning to network through your mentor will very likely be the most valuable single skill you can learn. Collaborating with your mentor as a future colleague will help them see you as a peer who should be introduced to their coworkers and superiors. Any time you present yourself as a future colleague, it can quickly become beneficial for both of your networks!

Expanding your Network:

- Seek introductions to your mentor's colleagues and superiors by asking about their job functions and how they relate to your field to help your network grow.
- People relate to people, not lists of accomplishments. While a well written cover letter and resume are necessary for an interview, mentor relationships are built on constructive conversation.
- Practice introducing yourself to your mentor and being introduced to people by your mentor. You may even meet a future mentor or find a mentee of your own through this new network.
- **Prompting Sentences:** "Do you have any colleagues that work for _____ company that you could connect me with?" or "I heard that you know _____, could you possibly connect me with them so that I can ask them...".

Note: *Be aware that most hiring is done through the human resources department. However, that said, ask your mentor for guidance in your internship or job search when appropriate.*