

The value of mentorship

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a mentor as a trusted counselor, guide, tutor, or coach.¹ Instructors, professors, academic advisors, preceptors, residency directors, and others serve as mentors throughout the formal educational process and as guides through our pharmacy degree and residency programs. In the workplace, however, mentors are not as easily identified. Employers will not always provide a formal mentorship program that clearly identifies those senior practitioners who are capable and, more importantly, willing to serve as mentors for new practitioners. Unfortunately, the early days of a new career can be some of the most cumbersome and challenging and may actually be the days when a mentor is needed most.

Most high demand jobs can be intimidating to the new practitioner who just finished pharmacy school or a residency. Feelings of intimidation and uncertainty can quickly lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness with one's work. Facing and overcoming these hindrances are essential to success. Finding an effective mentor can be the first step to overcoming the obstacles involved with beginning a new job and a new phase of life.

Mentorship can take several different forms. Some employers will provide formal mentorship programs for new employees. These programs often pair a new employee with a more experienced counterpart who will serve as the junior employee's mentor. Formal mentorship programs may even include informative programs that address issues and con-

cerns commonly encountered when beginning a particular job. In other instances, when mentorship is not formally created by employers, new employees must develop their own relationships and identify potential mentors. This can be a daunting task. New employees may feel intimidated when speaking to senior practitioners with whom they do not have an established relationship. The purpose of this article is to provide guidance for new practitioners who are professionals interested in finding a mentor early on in their careers.

Sharing the benefits of experience.

New pharmacists entering the work force today have an arsenal of information on drug therapies, disease state management, drug informatics, and the knowledge they need to perform their job. What they lack, however, is the experience that one gains only with time. While residency training can help decrease this deficit, most new practitioners would admit that there really is no replacement for time and the experience that comes with working at a particular job or in a profession for many years. A good mentor can provide a new practitioner with the benefit of his or her past experiences. For example, a new practitioner may be charged with initiating new clinical pharmacy services in a specific area of the hospital. Although this new practitioner probably has all of the drug knowledge and basic capabilities needed to successfully assume this role, he or she may have no experience setting up a protocol with physicians, integrating into a medical team that is not used

to working with a clinical pharmacist, or managing a daily schedule that is not preset by his or her supervisor. To tackle this intimidating task, the new practitioner should first seek out a mentor who has experience initiating new clinical services. Simple discussions with this mentor about his or her past experiences may be the jump-start the new pharmacist needs to devise ideas for new clinical services at the institution. The aspects that worked well for the mentor can be emulated and those ideas that failed can be avoided. This can lead to a smoother, more successful initiation of new services by the less experienced pharmacist.

Providing an example. Having a good example to follow can make the transition into the work force much easier. Part of being successful at most jobs is learning how to function in a new environment. New practitioners often have many questions about their new professional role: How much time should I spend after work hours, if any, finishing projects? What professional pharmacy associations should I join, and how involved should I become early in my career? How do I balance my professional and personal lives? Mentors serve as examples of successful, well-balanced professionals and can help new practitioners learn to balance their professional and personal lives. New pharmacists should not feel that they must take on every responsibility that their mentor is handling or avoid responsibilities and activities that their mentor avoids. Instead, the mentor's example should serve as a general guide to help the new practitioner make decisions and set priorities that may lead to a successful, rewarding, and well-balanced career.

Providing perspective. No matter how well trained and prepared, every new practitioner will have some type of negative experience during his or her early career. Mistakes will be made. Difficult situations may arise during inter-

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actions with patients, students, or fellow members of the health care team. For most new practitioners, this will be an unnerving experience that may never be forgotten. Without experience to provide perspective, the new pharmacist will probably think that the situation is much more severe than it truly is, with the simplest error or conflict being blown out of proportion. While appropriate concern and reflection about problems is positive and can lead to professional growth, inappropriate worry about negative experiences can easily lead to feelings of inadequacy and decreased self-confidence. A good mentor can help the new practitioner turn negative experiences into learning opportunities, provide the proper perspective to help the new practitioner realize the true severity of negative situations, and give advice for handling future difficulties.

Finding a mentor. Mentorship can help make the early days of the new practitioner's career more productive and, ultimately, more rewarding. When attempting to identify a suitable mentor, realize that he or she may not be someone with whom you initially identify yourself, nor may he or she be someone with whom you would form a personal friendship. The best mentor for you may be much further along in his or her career and professional course than you are or may be just a year or two more experienced than you. Effective mentors have several important qualities. A good mentor will have sufficient professional experience, a history of overall professional success that has not come at the expense of personal happiness, a good professional reputation and history of professional involvement, sufficient time to devote to a mentee, and the willingness to become a mentor. You may be lucky enough to find a mentor at your institution or place of employment. You may even find that you need more than one mentor. For example, you might identify one person to serve as an effective mentor for professional involvement and find another to serve as your mentor for becoming an effective preceptor to students and residents. An online mentorship program, available at www.ashp.org, connects new practitioners with experienced professionals who have already agreed to serve as mentors.

Every new practitioner can benefit from mentorship. Whether you need specific advice on how to best perform specific job duties or balance your personal and professional lives or need someone with more experience to place perspective on your successes and failures, mentors can provide the insight you need to establish a successful and rewarding career.

1. Merriam-Webster OnLine. Definition of mentor. www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=mentor (accessed 2005 Sep 20).

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