Developing & Optimizing Your mentoring Relationships

>> Nicole Redmond: Hello. I'm Nicole Redmond, and today I'll be talking to you about developing and optimizing your mentoring relationships. So briefly I'll go over our agenda. First we'll start with a definition of networking. Then we'll talk a little bit about the benefits of networking specifically for your career development. Then I'll discuss who should be in your mentoring networks and end with where, when and how to build your mentoring relationships. So first, let's start with the defend of networking. Networking is a set of behaviors used to develop and maintain relationships that can potentially provide information, influence, guidance and support to individuals in your careers. Ultimately, networking will result in authentic relationships that will provide social support. Here, I've listed several types of social support and some examples of each in the context of conducting scientific research.

Emotional support. And an example of this would trust and caring; reassurance, for example, if experiments haven't gone well and you need some emotional support for that. Instrumental support is tangible aid. So the provision of data collection services, grant funding or laboratory resources. Informational support would be things like training or subject-matter expertise, an appraisal or evaluation type things like peer review, or someone who provides editing for a manuscript that you're planning to submit. What networking isn't is just the accumulation of contact information. It's not quid pro quo, and it's not selfish. It's also not expecting without merit. There's a mutually beneficial outcome from networking. So why should we think about networking in the context of career development for research careers? Social network and careers research have emphasized the importance of engaging in networking behaviors in the attainment of valuable career outcomes, such as enhanced advancement, equitable compensation, career mobility and career satisfaction. In addition, science and most other disciplines are human enterprises driven by people.

As a reminder, the mission of the NIH is to support discovery and applied research to optimize human health. And so at the core of scientific advance is innovation. And the hallmark of innovation is interdependence. Innovation depends on the exchange of new perspectives, new information, and/or access to new and frequently unadvertised opportunities. As a reminder, success never occurs in isolation. Relationships matter, and so this starts a virtuous cycle of generosity. The trainees that you mentor today may be your collaborators tomorrow, and the collaborator you work with on a smaller project may result in future long-standing collaborations. So who should be in your network? I'll talk a little bit about the concept of developmental networks, network diversity and then managing these relationships. Often we make the mistake of thinking that there's one singular mentor. And this is a really famous mentor here, -Yoda. And so there tends to be a hyperfocus on finding that end-all, be-all person. And although there are some excellent individuals who can be a Yoda, you might want to consider having a broader network.

There's a body of literature that's growing to support the need for developmental network. These are multiple social relationships that can foster your career development and personal growth. It's a subset of an individual's social network and consists of multiple career advisors for specific needs or resources. Here's a table that highlights multiple different types of advisors and the role they might play in your development network for your career. For example, here's a navigator. This might be a senior faculty member or a division, or department chair, or perhaps it may be a named mentor or a career development application or application for a career development award.

They help with the alignment of career goals with advancement, and advancement could mean things like advancing to independent research funding or advancing through a promotion or tenure process. Next we have sponsor. This is typically a senior leader with decision-making capacity or significant influence. They connect you to other people and other opportunities. So these are things like award nominations, or maybe when they're -- they may suggest you for special committees or special projects. Coaches are advisors that help develop your specific skills. So these are typically people with very specific methodologic expertise or subject-matter expertise from who you learn specific things like writing data collection or data analysis. And then lastly there's a confidant. They're the person who provides the emotional support and listens to your challenges and triumphs. For those of you in graduate degree programs, or have done graduate degree programs, your thesis or dissertation committee was probably one of your very first developmental networks for research.

Network diversify is really important. One aspect to consider is network range, and that's the diversity of group affiliations and demographics of your network. This is important because they bring you access to resources and information that you may not have in your daily work. I'd like to note that historical and ongoing systemic bias or discrimination may constrain your networks. So for example, a first-generation student may not have access to study notes or practice tests because they don't have siblings or friends who were previously in the course, and they're new to the organization. Another aspect to consider is network position. Where in the organizational hierarchy are people within your network? Having a large or diverse network on some demographic characteristics may not be sufficient if the contacts are not of high enough status to be influential.

So this is the importance of understanding who are the leaders and potential sponsors for you within your network. Ideally, your network should represent the best of both worlds. One that provides interpersonal and relationship support as well as instrumental practical support and all the other dimensions of social support that we covered previously. Culturally concordant relationships may be particularly important for emotionally support, including coping and behavioral strategies for managing systematic bias and discrimination and helping you navigate organizational culture. Whereas culturally discordant relationships are important for that innovation, providing new opportunities, new ideas and resources. So one exercise you can do is to actually map your network. Think about who you know and who you work with. You can consider the people who help you get the job done. Who provides important information, scientific or technical advice, professional expertise or other resources?

These may be coaches, peers, consultants, or leadership within your organizational unit. You also want to think about people who help you advance your career. So general career guidance and direction, exposure to critically important people who have access to resources and information and organization advice. And most importantly, those sponsors who are advocates for you on your behalf that provide opportunities, assignments, promotions or other critical resources. These people are typically considered mentors or sponsors or even supervisors. Lastly, consider people who provide personal support for you. Those who are concerned about your emotional well-being and help you with coping and managing any impact on your performance issues, such as work-life integration, balancing family obligations and managing any systematic or interpersonal experiences of bias and discrimination. These may also be mentors, confidants or friends. So once you've given that some thought, you might want to take out a piece of paper and create a table that maps and identifies specific individuals that address these needs. Here I've suggested a few domains for you to consider so that you can identify who these individuals are within your own network and identify any potential gaps that you can work on for filling out your network.

So you can think about people within the professional development domain that provide information or skills to help you accomplish your work, that trusted advisor or coach, someone who provides the emotional support, role models that you look up to, trusted colleagues who are able to provide substantive feedback related to your work, sponsorship and access to opportunities and accountability, those who hold you accountable to the things that are important to you, your values and priorities as well as the outcomes of your work. Then once you've had a chance to take a look and list all of these individuals, evaluate the structure, content and quality of the relationships.

Think about the diversify. How similar or different are the individuals in your network in terms of gender, race, function, geography, organizational affiliation and how similar are they to you and to each other. Redundancy: is there a lot of overlap? Is there one person who is expected to serve every function for you, be your Yoda sort to speak or do you have a lot of different people helping you get the work done, but no one that's really providing you with personal support? Interconnectivity, how closed is the network? Does everyone know each other or do you have access to people in different disciplines, different organizations? Those could all really be helpful, and as I stated previously, a really important way to ensure the influx of new ideas and push you towards innovation. What's the strength of connection? When you think, a lot of people may know a lot of people, but they may not be close to you in terms of actual physical proximity, like being within your organization, or in relationship proximity - someone you know well enough that you can ask them to help you in some way. Is your network balanced?

Do you have too many mentors and maybe not enough mentees? Or too many senior people but not enough peers? What are their connections to power and influence? How would you characterize these individuals' influence on your career development in the field and giving you access to resources or opportunities? And then the size. How large or small is your network? Does it fit your goals, and is it a network that you can maintain? And we'll talk a little more about things to do to maintain those relationships.

Once you've established and assessed your network, we want to optimize these mentoring relationships. Here I've provided a few resources that help you understand how to have a successful relationship with a mentor. I'd like to call your attention to this mentoring skills model where we look at mentee-specific skills and mentor-specific skills. And as you can see, there are some skills that overlap between the two individuals. These shared skills include active listening and developing trust. That is they keep confidences shared between you. You commit to consistent meetings and engagements. You follow through on your commitments. You admit errors and take responsibility. And you tactfully disagree, and often sometimes those agreements can be overcome or reconciled by offering additional information or context. And you elicit and receive feedback non-defensively. And here I'd like to highlight a resource, a book called "Thanks for the Feedback" by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen. It's particularly good about how to elicit and receive feedback. Lastly, you want to identify goals and desired outcomes, and these should be revisited regularly. Because as your career develops, your career goals are likely going to change. Next, we want to manage yourself. One major part that you can control into your mentoring relationship is yourself. One thing you can do is learn how to acquire mentors, and we'll talk a little more about specific strategies later.

So you're going to apply these networking skills and build relationships based on mutual interest and values, and assure that they have adequate availability and resources to support you. You should know yourself. Know what your goals and values are, know what your current skills, knowledge and abilities are, and know your strengths as well as your areas for improvement, and seek strategies to help fill those gaps. We should always be prepared. Review and be ready to articulate your goals and needs, and then learn quickly. Observe carefully and integrate any new information and apply knowledge and skills to your current tasks. Again, elicit feedback and receive feedback non-defensively. Show initiative by asking clarifying questions and pursuing additional resources independently. And follow through, again, keeping your agreements and persisting through challenges, discouragements. You should also provide updates on progress or apprise your mentor of any new issues, challenges or opportunities. So sometimes managing your relationship can be really challenging. You might want to consider this matrix of considering your level of engagement versus level of respectful followship.

This matrix suggests that having high engagement and high followship is an effective way to mentor, where you're collaborative and action oriented, yet collegial. If you are low in engagement and low in followship, you tend to be disengaged and uncooperative and apathetic. High in engagement and low in respectful followship, you may come across as being disrespectful or unmanageable or even insubordinate. And lastly, if you're low in engagement but high in respectful followship, you may come across as being too passive and uncritical and ultimately likely to be unfulfilled because you are not considering your own values and needs. So again, in addition to managing yourself, you will need to manage this relationship. A reminder is to identify and frequently revisit your goals and desired outcomes.

When you're engaging with the mentor, you should negotiate the duration of the mentorship and frequency of meetings and be proactive in setting your agenda, and even in some cases, collecting your post meeting actions and summaries so that both of you can be accountable to what you've agreed needs to occur. Establish your preferred modes of communication, recognizing that many people have different communication styles and preferences, and so you need to come to an agreement of what will work for you in that relationship. The preferences may vary depending on the content and urgency and context of this relationship. It might vary in terms of preferences for written communication versus oral. And then there's a lot of modes, e-mail, phone, in-person, and the preferred mode might depend on the nature of the issues.

You should also consider who else should be included in communications such as other peers, team members and other leaders. Again, feedback is really critical for the mentoring relationship, and you can determine the method of feedback, whether that's written or oral, the frequency, whether that's ad hoc or in a formal evaluation process. Also note that there's varying types of feedback. Appreciation is one where you can show your gratitude for the person engaging you in this relationship, which is different from coaching type of feedback where they give you information about your skills and performance and evaluation, where they might actually tell you how well you're doing relative to some benchmark. Again, an important issue is to reassess and renegotiate these agreements as needed. Now, this isn't necessarily a formal process like a contract, but periodically, you should take some time to step back and communicate with your mentor or advisor around what the goals of the relationship are and whether it needs to continue. And maybe you've identified some gaps, and now you need to aggressively develop your network to address those gaps.

So where and when can you do this? When is ideally before you need something. This is where developing relationships simply by mutual interest, and even if there's not a clear need, is useful. Then there's also after you identify a need. This occurs a lot of times when you're preparing grant applications and you realize that you need a specific subject matter or methodological expertise. And then ongoing, thinking of everyone as a potential teacher. You should always be in a networking what value can I bring to this person and in turn what can I learn from this person, and that mindset will serve you well to keep you open to potential relationships that will develop -- will support your career development. Now, where should you network? Well, we're in a very unusual time, and so professional meetings and social settings aren't as common as they used to be, but e-mail and social media engagement are still ways that you can engage individuals that you're interested in meeting. And specifically around social media engagement, there might be special interest groups, or there might be thought leaders, and you can comment or interact on their posts. And then, of course, there is the option to direct message individuals from social media or by contacting them on their e-mail address.

There's a reason that correspondence information is always included on manuscripts. Because that allows you to engage directly with the authors. Now that you've figured out a networking opportunity, you've identified perhaps some specific individuals with whom you'd like to connect, how do you actually make it happen? So first you want to be prepared. You want to define the goals for connecting. The goal might be to gain some information or advice. You simply might just want an introduction. Or you might have heard about an opportunity, maybe a job or fellowship. But the ultimate goal is to build a relationship, and that consists of active listening and then also being prepared to offer your elevator pitch. And it provides context and sets expectations. It's not really telling and selling like an actual sales pitch.

A good elevator pitch has several components. Tells who you are. So for example, my name is Mary Jones, and I'm a first-year research faculty. It might provide some context about what and where you are studying or working. So I'm Mary Jones in the cardiology division, studying the research of neighborhood characteristics of cardiovascular health. You can also give a snapshot of your relevant experience and expertise. In this case, she submitted a manuscript and is preparing an application for a career development award. And then close with the goal of your conversation. "Given your qualitative methods and expertise, I'd like to determine your interest in collaborating with me on my next project." Another strategy is to be visible. Engage in as many professional and community activities that your schedule allows, and you can strategically volunteer for leadership in committees that are in alignment with your career goals. You want to be very clear that you're not spreading yourself too thin. So this is an area where taking some advice from your existing network of mentors or advisors can help you identify the highest yield activities where you'll be exposed to people with the information, skills, knowledge or influence that will help propel your career. You can also increase your organizational visibility through accepting challenging work assignments.

And this is particularly important where one of the key issues around sponsorship is that sponsor needs to know enough about you and your skills, and can speak to your work in order to advocate for you in context when you're not present. And so you need to be visible enough for them to be aware of your work in your competency. Next, we want identifying potential contacts.

There's a lot of ways to approach identifying contacts. Again, for conferences, meetings, even this one, there are program speakers. And so taking a look at those bios, figuring out what are their subject-matter expertise, their organizational affiliations. You can also talk to colleagues and think about second and third-degree friends or relationships. It's not uncommon that when you talk about someone's, say, academic pedigree, you find out that they were colleagues in previous training with someone who has knowledge or expertise that would be of interest to you. And then there's always cold contacts, again, via web search. You might be reading something in the medical literature and directly reach out to the authors, or interact in, again, social media settings. The other thing is to determine the win for the other person.

Again, we want this to be a bidirectional relationship. So I like to say acknowledge their inner ... Acknowledge that they have value and expertise, and I think everyone likes flattery to some degree. Do your homework. Don't waste your time asking for things that you easily could have just found online, or easily figured out had you asked the colleague who introduced you. And then think about ways you can reciprocate whenever you're able, and that might mean paying it forward in another way. Now, a lot of scientists are introverts, and I wanted to highlight a few tips specifically for the introverts. Again, some people may struggle in these social situations and have trouble interacting with people that they don't know, but I'd encourage you to adjust your mindset. Again, think of one, you have a lot to offer, and then think about all of the interesting things that you could learn and be exposed to by engaging someone new. So focus on the goal and don't worry about the crowd. And this, of course, applies more to in-person opportunities, but a lot of times the goal is not to meet everyone that's attending a conference, but maybe one to three specific people that you've identified, and then you've met your goal for networking, and then it's okay to leave. The other thing you can do is prepare. So again, review the attendee, your speaker list.

You could even consider e-mailing individuals ahead of time. For example, you might note that someone in your field will be attending the meeting, and you had some questions maybe about a paper they presented, and you can actually initiate a meeting with them during a break, because you'll be in the same place at the same time. You can also have some conversation starters written, and I'll talk about a few of those suggestions on the next slide. Or you can volunteer. Sometimes being behind the scenes gives you access to invited attendees and speakers in a way that you wouldn't have during the regular course of the meeting. Lastly, sometimes it's just helpful to have a sidekick, and this is where your peers or sponsors or other colleagues are helpful where they can provide a warm introduction and highlight the areas of mutual interest between you and the individual you're trying to meet. You also want to engage your natural observation and listening skills.

You're a scientist, and these are the things that you do. So open-ended questions really help make the person that you're trying to meet do all the talking. And of course, nod and smile, and stay engaged with your active listening skills. Then finally, once the socializing feels to be a little too much, you can be really strategic about starting and stopping the interaction. You might to give yourself a minimum time limit or some other metric, like if you're in a social setting, again, not as frequent these days, but you can say: "I'm going to stay in this networking facility or networking opportunity or networking happy hour for 1 hour, and I'm going to walk straight to the back and try to meet at least one or two people on my way back out of the room and have at least one drink and one snack and at least one conversation."

The other thing you can do is after you meet someone, there may not be time for a full conversation so you can set a time to meet or other plan for follow-up either via e-mail or phone. Lastly, practice makes perfect, or at least practice makes permanent patterns, so you can try out this networking in your own institution. For example, meeting individuals in a neighboring department, or practicing in smaller settings, smaller meetings where you may have a little more familiarity with the other attendees. Here are a few conversation starters that you can consider ahead of time that help get others talking and help you learn what their knowledge and capabilities are so that you'll have a better sense that they may fit into your developmental network, and if you should pursue a mentoring relationship with them.

Have you attended this meeting? Have you heard any of the speakers? What are your thoughts about what's being discussed? How did you get into this field? What advice would you have for me as someone that's new to the area? What are your thoughts on all of the newest research or the lecture that we just heard? I followed you on social media when you made a post about some specific topic. Could you tell me more about this issue, because I had a question? So these are all some strategies that you can use to start the conversation and understand if this person might be someone that you want to engage in your developmental network. Lastly, you want be sure you follow up. You can't just start a network and not maintain it, and this goes for all of the relationships in your network. Again, some of these things are a little challenging in the times of staying at home, but you can still send a periodic check-in e-mail or phone call or set up a web meeting at some interval to check in on people that you've included in your network, and again, staying engaged. Immediately after seeing someone, it's always great to say thank you, and that can be in person and nowadays via e-mail. And if it's an initial meeting, sometimes that mentoring interaction is getting that advice in that moment, and that's the scope of the relationship.

In other cases, you might find that this person has an expertise, and that you want some ongoing access to, and so then you want to ask permission to stay in touch. When you're reengaging people, one thing to do is to share your success. Update on your progress or outcome. You can remind them of the context of your conversation like, "Hi, I met you at that conference last year" and remind them about the discussion, "We were talking about the challenges of data collection," and then you can update them, say, "Hey, your advice was really great" or "I also found this other resource," which is also a great time to return the favor and pay it forward. You might e-mail them an article of interest or share with them additional resources you found after you met. Lastly, they might have mentioned an issue or challenge they were having, and you were able to facilitate an introduction for them.

So now that we've talked about developing these mentoring relationships and maintaining these developmental networks, this is the time for you to reflect, and I'd like to hear some discussion around what your developmental network looks like. Were there any patterns you noticed, styles, demographic issues, diversity in your network, which levels of influence? What about your networking style? Have you employed any of the strategies that have been suggested? How effective have you been with networking so far in your career? Are there any opportunities where you can improve or any best practices that you can share, and are there any action items that you can glean moving forward from this talk?

Do you want to polish your elevator pitch? Do you want to hone in on some gaps in your developmental network? Have you been effectively following up with the contacts in your network? Is there someone that perhaps you should reengage at this point in your career? I'd like to end with a few resources here, and I believe these can be provided. A lot of what I've been discussing around developmental networks could be found at the Syracuse University ADVANCE website. Brigham and Women's Hospital has a mentoring toolkit with a number of resources including worksheets to help you map your developmental network. I mentioned managing the mentoring relationship, and so there are a number of e-books that are available to you online for free and a number of Harvard Business Review articles around mentoring, specifically around managing two important parts of the relationship: managing yourself but then also managing your mentor. Thank you for your time, and I'd be happy to address any comments or questions at this time.