

How to Mentor More People — and Not Get Burned Out

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January 02, 2024



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Summary. While mentoring people can be extremely rewarding, it has its challenges. It can be time-consuming and frustrating. However, if you structure and administer mentorships wisely, you can overcome the challenges, excel in being a mentor, and enhance your standing... [more](#)

Advancing in a career can come with a variety of benefits — the more expert one becomes, the more one is sought out for guidance and perspective. Invitations to give talks, serve in leadership roles, and weigh in on big decisions begin to accumulate. And before long, others come to you with requests for mentorship as they embark on their own journeys.

Over time, however, the barrage of requests for mentorship from junior members of the team can become distracting, tedious, and a source of burnout, particularly when such interactions go unrecognized by your organization. This is a phenomenon particularly familiar to those in demographics underrepresented in the higher tiers of a profession.

Managing mentorship and preventing burnout requires specific tactics for success. In this article, we present five solutions based on years of experience mentoring undergraduates, graduate students, post-graduate trainees, and young faculty that have culminated in the creation of team-based mentorship programs in our fields. These five strategies will help you actively manage mentorships more efficiently and sustainably throughout your career.

1. Divide your mentees into teams.

When mentoring numerous individuals at once, it is easy to feel compelled to take complete responsibility for each mentee. However, the cumulative burden can become overwhelming. This challenge can be overcome by organizing mentees into subgroups consisting of three to four mentees with varying degrees of experience and led by the mentee with the greatest expertise within the team.

Creating mentee teams enables them to operate semi-autonomously. For example, teams can meet on their own on a scheduled basis. More senior or experienced members of the team can help mentor less-experienced members. Senior members benefit from this structure by learning how to properly mentor early on in their careers, while less-experienced members benefit from having a “go to” person they can easily access.

Although you are still responsible for mentoring each individual long-term, creating subgroups allows you to mentor more efficiently by creating a team-based support structure for everyone, delegating day-to-day career development questions to each sub-group leader, and protecting time to foster higher-level discussions with individual mentees when needed.

We have found that mentees prefer these team-based mentorship models because it increases their access to a larger pool of advisors and supports learning more effectively while still giving them the confidence that they are under the watchful eye of an expert. It also allows you to identify members of your team well suited to become future managers and leaders.

2. Set expectations with mentees early.

Working with a great mentee is rewarding for everyone. Conversely, a mentee who does not follow through on expectations or whose vision does not align with yours exacerbates mentor fatigue. The lack of objective guidelines on when to end a mentor-mentee relationship adds to the challenge.

One way to standardize this process is to create a mentorship contract for each mentee outlining your expectations. Communicating expectations clearly from the beginning can prevent onboarding of uncommitted mentees. Examples of expectations include timing of response to emails, frequency of meetings, and specific areas that are “off limits” for discussion. Another approach to standardizing your hiring and firing practices is to give mentees a set number of opportunities to demonstrate their commitment based on the established expectations. The number of opportunities granted is determined by you, which offers flexibility in your approach to everyone.

For example, if you are committed to supporting women or people of color, you might allocate more “mentee missed opportunities” before ending the mentorship relationship. Separately, for

someone less promising, you might provide fewer opportunities. A failure to execute the set number of opportunities gives you data that can support your decision to cut ties with a mentee. This approach requires investment up front to administer tasks that give the mentee the opportunity to prove themselves — or not. Preserve yourself for those who follow through on these tasks, and end the relationship with those who do not.

3. Use technology to your advantage.

For mentors who receive a high volume of mentorship requests, technology can be used to promote efficiency during introductory meetings. Having a fixed time and web-based signup for meetings during office hours every month will reduce the burden of scheduling, and multiple mentees can meet with you at the same time. Such group meetings also allow mentees to learn from each other and help them make additional networking relationships.

You can also use technology to your advantage by recording videos of your answers to frequently asked questions. Sending these videos out prior to office hours increases the depth of conversations and serves as an initial test of commitment. Posting this content on your website or social media expands your reach.

4. Brand your efforts.

While many agree that developing the next generation of talent is invaluable, most institutions do not formally recognize the time and energy invested in mentorship in the form of financial incentives or promotions. One way to overcome this is to brand your efforts strategically so that it aligns with key institutional priorities.

In our experience, passionate mentees are the best form of local and even national reputation building. Branding your efforts by highlighting your mentees online using social media is one approach; this can also serve as an indirect but effective tool for recruitment of additional talent. Showcasing the successes of your mentees within your organization can amplify your team's ideas and status. Establishing your reputation as someone capable of building a pipeline of excellence is priceless.

5. Hold organizations accountable.

A true commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion comes from investment in grass roots initiatives focused on mentorship. As such, organizations must provide dedicated time and funding for meaningful mentorship.

To promote equal access to opportunity and investment in such obligations, institutions must recruit a diverse body of mentors and avoid preferentially assigning unpaid tasks to underrepresented, early- or mid-career managers (or, in the case of academic institutions, faculty). Next, institutions must formulate objective metrics for evaluating mentorship. Finally, it

is important for them to dedicate financial resources to support and develop good mentors. Online educational modules and ill-defined team-building activities will never generate the return on investment that proper mentorship can.

By the end of our careers, we realize that our legacy is firmly rooted in the relationships we have nurtured and the careers we have cultivated. But in order to achieve those end-of-career goals, we must enhance the current state of mentorship to make it more palatable, efficient, and practical for both mentors and mentees alike.

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