



## **No One is an Island**

# **Why Mentorship is Crucial to Research Administration**

*By Sarah Lampson*

In a previous role I reviewed and negotiated an average of 580 clinical research agreements per year for 4 years. That is all I did all day, every day and I certainly became an expert with all that practice. I did not think I needed a mentor because I had created a network of peers for mutual support and assistance when issues arose. Fortunately for me, I developed a strong mentoring relationship with an external counterpart even before I realized how much I could gain from a mentor. The coaching, support and expertise my mentor provided inspired me so much I went on to start a national inter-professional mentorship program for those in clinical research careers. Fully engaged in our busy, specialized roles, research administrators can easily miss opportunities to collaborate and grow through a mentorship program, but it is so beneficial it deserves our serious consideration.

Mentors can improve our career confidence, increase our professional independence while easing isolation, facilitate our growth, help us advance our careers and develop our investment in our roles. Mentorship creates collaboration, reduces stress by providing support, exposes you to a different perspective and improves productivity. Our field and our institutions are rewarded by the satisfaction, self reflection and education a strong mentoring relationship affords.

## Finding a mentor

Decide what you are looking for in a mentor. Do you want general career advice, an expert in a particular aspect of your job, insight on developing certain skills beyond your current role but necessary for advancement, someone to provide feedback, help setting goals or someone to help you network and raise your professional profile? Do you want a formal mentoring relationship with set meetings for a finite time period or do you prefer a more fluid, informal relationship? Do you want someone internal to teach you about your organization's culture and hidden job requirements or do you want the increased privacy and different perspective an external professional would bring? Being able to articulate what you are looking for will better position you to recruit a mentor.

If you have access to a formal program that matches mentors and mentees then that is usually an efficient way to find a mentor; however, do not rule out the value of approaching candidates directly. Ask a conference speaker, an author or someone you know and admire. Request assistance from your professional organization or seek someone through your contacts and groups on LinkedIn. If that person cannot meet your needs he or she may agree to at least meet once for a brief information interview or recommend someone in his or her network. Don't limit your search to only the highest level of an organization, it is often the staff doing the day to day work in the field that are most aware of job openings, educational opportunities and career development support networks and the most willing to invest in you and your growth.

## Becoming a Mentor

As well as finding a mentor for yourself, consider your opportunities to be a mentor through the career continuum. A clear way to demonstrate your leadership skills is by mentoring someone new to research administration. Mentoring strengthens research administration as a profession by helping one person at a time. Whether you mentor one person or a small group, you will be having a positive impact on someone else's career and life and

add an interesting and rewarding dimension to your career. You can find a mentee through professional organizations, your university's alumni association, at a conference or recruiting a student or volunteer to your office.

## The Mentoring Relationship

You and your mentor create and re-define your unique relationship. Some mentors feel they are providing measurable value when a mentee has a regular, recurring meeting with specific questions. Others prefer informal lunches or coffee breaks to talk about whatever is going on at a particular institution or recent changes in the field. Some people prefer in-person mentoring but a strong relationship can also be developed by email and telephone calls.

My mentor brought a unique skillset to our relationship. My roles in research have been strictly administrative but my mentor had a clinical background which gave her a richer perspective on risk, ethics and the impact administrative policies have on researchers. Her role was broader than mine and acquainted me with a variety of careers in our field and the skill sets that made each position distinct. My mentor works at a different institution, has extensive experience and knowledge of opportunities to share with me. Over the years she has given invaluable encouragement and support by (i) providing me with access to workshops at her institution (ii) sharing information on webinars to broaden my expertise (iii) forwarding articles and recommending other readings (iv) advising me of conferences (v) widening my professional network by introducing me to external researchers and senior administrators I would not normally meet (vi) assessing my abilities and helping me identify goals (vii) attending a webinar I co-lead and providing me with positive, constructive feedback (viii) urging me to think in a longer term way about current aims and accomplishments (ix) critiquing my resume (x) be willing to assist me by providing a professional reference.

## How Your Institution Benefits

I have privately mentored people who have approached me in complete confidence, and I encourage managers not to be threatened by employees that report to you seeking mentors. A mentor does not replace or diminish a supervisor's role but enhances staff expertise and professionalism. If your staff members learn new skills, set higher goals and have a strong sense of ownership over their professional development, this will empower your entire team. Being mentored and mentoring demonstrate a strong commitment to research administration and align well with the educational mandate of academic institutions. Employees that have strong support networks have more job satisfaction and are less likely to get discouraged or burnout. Mentors inspire passion and engagement – something we all want for our teams.

## Completion of Your Mentoring Partnership

When your mentoring relationship ends because of the time period agreed to or it has reached maturity and you simply have been in touch less frequently, take the time to thank your mentor or mentee for his or her contribution to your career and outlook. Reflect on your successes and how you can further contribute to creating a mentorship culture in research administration. Whether you want to mentor someone else or suggest another mentee to your mentor, you will be advancing our profession and build strong, collegial relationships that will continue throughout your lifetime. ■



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enhance Canada's research capability and capacity. In 2011, Sarah co-authored a book on career management in research administration, *Steer Your Career: A Research Administrator's Manual for Mapping Success*. She has been ably and generously mentored by Mary Jane Sayles of St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, Ontario for many years.