

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com), and may be published in forthcoming issues.



## The magical mentor I – Who they are... and who they aren't

Dear Uncle Mole,

It's been a long time, and I hope my dearth of correspondence hasn't given you the wrong impression. I've thought of you often these last few months as the rollercoaster of academic life has twisted up, down and upside down, often when I've least expected it. Aside from the occasional moment of gastrointestinal revolt, it's been an incredible ride. Yet in between the exhilaration of 360° spins, I've had some time to ponder the beginnings of this life-altering journey. Whether launching one's career as a fledgling

newcomer, developing critical ideas into a sustainable research base, or networking to expand connections and influence, where would any of us be without the support and encouragement of our most trusted advisors?

It's hard to define exactly what makes a good mentor. In fact, the more I've thought about those who have guided my path thus far, the more I realize how different each of them are. There's no one-size-fits-all description for a good mentor anymore than there exists the mentoring superhero with the right answer every time. Like an investment portfolio, it's important to diversify, not only in projects and collaborations but also in mentoring relationships. And the first step in finding a good mentor is knowing what to look for.

When I first started as a graduate student, I thought I knew what I was doing; too bad I was completely fooled by the façade of Dr Fox. As they say, fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me. Now, a few years wiser, I have my list of non-negotiables: a good mentor must be interested, available and proactive.

In the hierarchical environment of academia, senior faculty need an entourage, a coterie of sorts to maintain their enterprise. Tenure and advancement often depend upon the supposition that one's activities include mentoring trainees and assisting with career development. At first, I thought Dr Fox fit this bill. He certainly liked talking about publications. It was only after joining the lab that I started to realize something. No one in the lab got to pursue an original idea. No one in the lab presented at meetings. No one in the lab ever saw a copy of a grant submitted by our erstwhile 'mentor', let alone be granted permission to submit a proposal in a bid for scientific independence. Dr Fox – like a lot of bad mentors – cultivated a training environment that functioned like a dictatorship. He was interested all right, just not in anything that mattered for anyone else. By contrast, the many wonderful mentors who have proven so crucial to my own professional development – and professional happiness – are all united by their interest in someone other than themselves. Even though at times it's hard to believe, they are all interested in... me.

Working with a great mentor is a humbling experience. After all, why should someone more successful and more accomplished invest so much precious time into someone so lowly? There are probably many answers to this question – and, Uncle Mole, as a fabulous mentor yourself I'd be curious to hear your thoughts – but whatever their reasons, great mentors take an active interest in not only where their mentees are headed but also in who they are. I met with my current laboratory PI recently to discuss the state of my project. My activities as a translational investigator have kept me out of the lab for the last several months, so we've been communicating exclusively by email. We had a lot to talk about – IRBs, data, collaborations – yet the first thing she said was, "So great to see you!" And it was. When I left her office an hour later, I had my work cut out for me, but I also bounced out of the building with the spring in my step that comes from knowing

someone really believes in me and where I'm headed.

This kind of interaction is that much more meaningful when one's ideas – as mine often do – move past the boundaries of traditional academic silos. As one of my most trusted mentors, my dear friend Vole gives his full, thoughtful attention to even the wildest of interdisciplinary projects that motivate my every waking moment. "Hmmm, most interesting," he says, even when we both know this latest hypothesis is really pushing the limits. And then several weeks or even months later I'll receive an email with a link to a source that might be helpful. A great mentor can't generate ideas for you or do the legwork required to bring a project to fruition. But their support and enthusiasm along the way can make all the difference.

In addition to interest, great mentors are also available. Sometimes I feel guilty scheduling time to talk with some of my mentors. They are so very busy how could they possibly have room for me? The thing is, the great mentors – the ones who see themselves as a guide for those of us trying to follow their footsteps – well, they always make time. When I started in my current program, I was assigned a 'mentor'. I'm not sure how these pairings were made, but the leadership wanted us to meet every 6 months for 'mentoring'. As you can imagine, when mentor and mentee receive an email attachment with a list of what 'mentoring' entails, this may not be the basis for the most successful of relationships. This 'mentor' is a very prominent figure in the field and, at first, I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet with her. The problem was that every time I had a question about anything, including rather significant life and career decisions, my attempts to arrange a time to meet were never answered. I didn't mind – this pairing was reminiscent of a blind date that wasn't working – and several other trusted mentors have helped me sort through these crucial decisions. Yet I couldn't help but contrast this scenario with what unfolded when I sent a brief email query to one of the greatest intellectual luminaries at my current institution.

This particular individual is well known for being one-of-a-kind, even in an environment teeming with movers and shakers. However, he is also well known for taking an interest in trainees, even those at my humble position in the pecking order. After having the chance to work

with him a few times – and having him call on me to ask the last question at a plenary session in a crowded auditorium instead of one the bigwigs in the front row – I decided I to ask if he was willing to meet with me. My specific career questions had been developed after spending several years watching him not only do it all but also do it better than almost anyone else. His reply to my email popped into my inbox 17 minutes later on a Friday afternoon. "Of course, I'd be delighted," he said, and I knew he meant it when his assistant contacted me 10 minutes later. And that, Uncle Mole, is how I found myself sitting on an upholstered chair in the office of one of the most legendary scholars of our time. It was amazing! I felt like Harry Potter talking to Albus Dumbledore. Indeed, that conversation led to an idea that has already had a positive effect on my training.

Finally, in addition to being interested and available, great mentors are also proactive on behalf of their mentees. Part of what they know – and what we don't – is the sorts of activities and projects a fledgling academic needs on her CV to move to the next level. As a newly accepted junior member of my current institution, it has been lovely to have our Chair seek me out as a co-author on several projects she has underway. Whether she works alone or with me has no effect on her standing... but she knows full well my involvement on a project with her will be huge for me. She's not only interested in my career prospects and available to talk about them, but she's also going out of her way to pave the way for my continued development. As Vole likes to say, "Play the game, play the game." It just takes me aback so many heavy hitters are willing to go to bat for me!

I shall stop here for now, Uncle Mole, as there are experiments to plan, manuscripts to finish and, alas, dishes to be put away (at least the dishwasher takes care of the first bit). But I do want to pick up this thread soon, because there's more to say about where to find a good mentor. May this missive find you up to no good in the very best way... and, Uncle Mole, I do hope you realize what an incredible mentor you are!

Always,

**Molette**

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