



# Voices of the new generation: mentorship as a junior PI

Vaishnavi Ananthanarayanan

Mentorship is an important component of academic success. Here, I share my personal experience as a mentee and a mentor from the perspective of a junior principal investigator.



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Let's face it, academia is a tough nut to crack no matter what stage you are at in your career. That is why a mentor, whether formal or informal, is invaluable in helping mentees navigate the complex academic landscape and in driving us towards achieving our goals.

I receive formal mentorship from a committee comprising senior colleagues, with whom I meet once a year to review my goals, progress and achievements. While such formal mentorship helps to align career goals with expectations from the host department or institute, I have found informal mentorship to be more transparent, unassuming and overall more beneficial to furthering my career. My informal mentors have included senior and mid-career researchers in India, but also in various other places around the world, all working on a diverse range of topics. While luck played a big role in helping me identify my informal mentors, mutual trust was the factor that made our relationships click. I have turned to my informal mentors for suggestions on improving grant proposals and manuscripts, to learn from their experiences about trainee mentorship, to understand the academic landscape, to seek advice about taking difficult decisions, or even just to vent after a particularly frustrating day at work. As a junior PI, I also feel that my peers play an important part in informal mentorship — I frequently turn to colleagues who are at a similar career stage for advice on day-to-day matters and to discuss common challenges.

These informal and peer-based mentoring strategies are also the basis of my personal approach to mentoring students, which draws from my PhD advisor's method. Following a short phase of training by me or other senior members in the lab, students become regarded as colleagues for all practical purposes. This is not to suggest that I am not acutely aware of the inherent hierarchy of academia. However, I would not label myself as the 'expert' in the lab anymore. The shared ethos

of my laboratory promotes independence, openness, integrity and, above all, happiness. Students have the independence they need to set their daily schedules and to drive their research; we communicate openly about our research challenges; and we conduct our research with the highest degree of integrity. The mental and physical health of my lab members is my first priority, with emphasis on nurturing hobbies and maintaining work-life balance.

To me, another important aspect of mentorship is personalization. Every trainee requires unique mentorship that is best suited to their personality. At the beginning of a student's time in my lab, we lay out each other's expectations and responsibilities and meet regularly thereafter to review them. Successful mentorship also needs to be adaptable. Students in my lab typically start their research based on a funded research proposal, which gives them a 'big picture' perspective and a framework for initial experiments. While the research direction might change following these initial experiments, I find that this approach affords them the confidence that researchers need to think about new experiments. I also like to stay in touch with practical aspects of doing research, engaging closely with students when they carry out experiments and involving myself in benchwork or microscopy as often as I can. The takeaway here is that the process of mentoring, and being mentored, evolves continuously in step with the mentor-mentee relationship.

I shall soon transition away from being a junior PI, but I will continue to seek mentorship throughout the rest of my academic career. Finally, a disclaimer: these strategies have worked well for me, but they are by no means the only or the correct ways to mentor or be mentored. You must find what works for you, and have fun while you're at it!

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Centre for BioSystems  
Science and Engineering,  
Indian Institute of Science,  
Bangalore, India.

e-mail: [vaishnavi@iisc.ac.in](mailto:vaishnavi@iisc.ac.in)

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