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**How Can I Be a Better Mentor in the Grants Profession?
Best Practices for Mentors**

*Dr. Mollie Bond, Ed.D., Director of Foundation and Corporate
Relations, Moody Bible Institute*

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07. Professionalism

Abstract

Mentoring is a relationship that can bring grant professionals to a greater level of success. In 2017, the Grant Professionals Association (GPA) developed a mentoring program specifically for grant professionals called Mentor Match to “raise the level of professionalism” of grant professionals (GPCI Competencies and Skills number 7).

Through the GPA’s Mentor Match program, a mentor can benefit from learning new skills from a mentee, give back to the grants profession, and help another person form positive lifelong work skills and habits. Grant professionals can grow in their career and life by being a mentor.

This strategy paper presents some best practices mentors can apply when engaging in a mentoring relationship. By realizing the importance of mentoring and applying these best practices, a mentor can enhance the mentorship. Some best practices include setting expectations, asking questions, and ensuring regular engagement with a mentee.

Introduction

Mentorship benefits those that choose to engage in an intentional relationship which grows a person professionally (as a mentor or a mentee), particularly in the grants profession. For example, a grants professional might be working from home. Or a grants professional may be working in an office but as an office of “one” which does not allow for coworkers who understand the grants profession. In any of these situations, a mentoring relationship can be a source of collegial support or advice. Mentorship is one way for a grants professional to overcome isolation.

Mentorship may also benefit a grants professional serving as a mentor in other ways. For example, a grants professional may want to learn how to build a relationship with a potential funder. Or perhaps a grants professional needs help navigating office politics with a principal investigator. A mentor can enhance the future of the grants profession by helping the mentee with a goal based on his or her challenge. In addition, a mentor may find some practices and habits growing stale without the option to learn from another or “give back” to the profession. Yet, it may be cumbersome to find a mentee without the aid of a national program that has a readily accessible community of grant professionals.

The Grant Professionals Association created the Mentor Match program¹ congruent with its mission to “build and support a community of grant professionals committed to serving the greater public good” (Grant Professionals Association, 2018). The GPA’s Mentor Match program recruited its first 10 mentors in July 2017 before opening the program to mentees. In September 2017, the first mentor-mentee pair began meeting. By January 2019, approximately 50 people signed up to be mentors and approximately 150 people enrolled as mentees. The need for such a program specific to the grants profession is clear: 200 people enrolled within 18 months of the program launch.

This strategy paper presents best practices for mentors while in a mentoring relationship through a mentoring program, such as the GPA’s Mentor Match program.

First, what is mentorship? The GPA’s Mentor Match program defines mentoring as “the relationship between a grants professional who has a passion to guide, inspire and motivate others and a lesser experienced person in the profession who is seeking to accomplish a goal” (GPA Mentor Match Program, 2018). This definition is unique to the people enrolled within the GPA’s Mentor Match program. Other mentorship definitions vary.

Essentially, a mentor helps a mentee move into the next phase of the mentee’s professional development journey. A mentor may guide and direct a mentee, sometimes in general situations and other times with a specific challenge, depending on the mentee’s needs. Mentoring in this manner allows the mentee to gain experience so that the next time a similar situation arises, the transformed mentee will tackle the issue smoothly on his or her own. For example, if a mentee sought support from a mentor during a hiring procedure (Bond, 2017), the next time the mentee needs to hire, the lessons learned while in the mentoring relationship may help make the hiring process easier.

Best Practices

Best practices, based on existing literature on mentorship and feedback from mentors and mentees involved in the GPA’s Mentor Match program, can help improve mentoring relationships and outcomes. *Best practices* are repeatable practices that align with proven and theoretically-based research (Brondyk & Searby, 2013). Understanding these best practices will help unlock benefits to mentors and mentees.

Set clear goals and expectations. After the pair is formed, the first meeting should include a discussion about goals and expectations (Sanfey, Hollands, & Gantt, 2013). One mentee within the GPA’s Mentor Match program said, “I would have benefitted more if I had first worked out what exactly I wanted to learn from my mentor before engaging [with my mentor]. I think I can get the *knowledge* online or in a book but the *experience* is something that will take time to learn [without a mentor]” (Johnson, A., personal communication, December 27, 2018).

¹ The author serves as the chair of the GPA’s Mentor Match Committee.

Ask questions and listen. During subsequent meetings, ask and expect mentees to arrive with a list of topics and timelines for goals (Sanfey et al., 2013). Mentees need to be self-starters for their goals and commit to the relationship (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). Mentors should consider themselves a source of support and a listening ear (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006), not the person directing the meetings.

Mentors are not people who accomplish the mentee's goal or do the work for the mentee. In such scenarios, an unhealthy dependency can emerge. Instead, a mentor should consider contemplative questions that help the mentee draw out solutions or provide resources and tools that will help the mentee accomplish the goal he or she desires to reach. Mentees' willingness to learn allows them to have shared meaning with their mentors and become active participants in gathering knowledge (Raabe & Beehr, 2003; Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001).

By asking thoughtful questions, a mentor can guide a mentee toward a new revelation. Asking questions like, "How does this experience change your day-to-day work?" gives a mentee space to reflect on what he or she gleaned and how to apply what he or she observed. As a result, the active learning phase blooms into metacognition and self-monitoring (Swap et al., 2001). In addition, a mentor could conduct experiential learning activities such as role-playing and observation, which gives space for trial-and-error moments and plenty of activity to be a basis of a great discussion.

Learn from the relationship. Mentorship can benefit a mentor while the mentor is helping the mentee. Mentors may learn new trends, ideas, or procedures from mentees that advance their careers or reenergize them in their current careers (Ragins, 1997). A mentor through the GPA's Mentor Match program said,

Working with my mentees has caused me to revisit issues that, as an 'experienced' grants professional, I've not thought about for a while. After being in the 'business' for nearly 20 years, I'm very comfortable with how I do things. I have my routines that I've developed after years of trial and error.

Working with people who are looking to improve their professional skills and outcomes has made me reexamine my routines to see if they need to be tweaked. We are working in an industry that is constantly changing so we need to continue to challenge our skills and approaches in order to keep up--and mentoring those who are undertaking these challenges with us helps to keep our skills sharp too. (Whitacre, M., personal communication, June 28, 2018)

A mentee in the GPA Mentor Match program also noticed this benefit for mentors. "Mentors should be careful that they don't discount the wisdom and experience mentees can bring to the relationship as well. It should be a learning and growing process for both parties" (Johnson, A., personal communication, December 31, 2018). If a mentor is open to learning from a mentee, the mentor gains knowledge in new trends.

Help the mentee stay focused. Sometimes a mentee wants to tackle many aspects of his or her goal at once. A mentor may wish to suggest the mentee to consider giving up a commitment if a mentee is not accomplishing work toward the mentee's goal. A mentee may need to say "no" to events, activities, studies, and projects (outside of their employment arrangement) that do not advance the stated goal of that mentee (Sanfey et al., 2013).

Support the mentee in networking. Networking is another key element of mentoring (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). For a grants professional, networking may mean meeting a new potential funder through a mentor. Or a mentor may connect a mentee more deeply with others in the grants profession which could lead to future job opportunities or clients. Networking as avenues for mentees to expand their career opportunities or to increase the likelihood of reaching a career goal can be a priority for mentees (Hopkins & Grigoriu, 2005).

Ensure regular interaction. The time spent on mentoring can be a factor in relationship success. Within one study, mentees desired more regularity in the pairs' meetings and communications (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Dymock, 1999). Meeting frequently heightens the perception of being similar and therefore the connection grows within the relationship (Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016; Ragins, 1997; Young, Cady, & Foxon, 2006).

The Mentor Match program through the GPA recognizes the time limitations of many mentors and therefore requests that mentors meet with their mentee for at least one hour per month during the year-long program. However, the mentor and mentee may decide to meet more frequently.

Conclusion

Mentoring is important to the grants professional as a mentor or a mentee because it heightens the grant professionals industry. As one person improves his or her grants professionalism, the reputation of the grants profession may rise in the minds of those that person interacts with, whether as a mentee or a mentor. If the relationship transforms the person involved in the mentoring relationship through applying best practices, mentorship can bring greater self-awareness and success.

The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) recognizes the value of raising "the level of professionalism" (GPCI Competencies and Skills number 7). Creating the Mentor Match program for GPA members will help individuals overcome issues like isolation and roadblocks possibly due to singular thinking.

Mentors should consider the goals of their mentees and what level of support the mentees desire in that area of potential growth. To properly help their mentees, mentors must know what their mentees expect. In the beginning stages of the relationship, mentors should ask mentees about their goals.

Mentors can apply a number of best practices and processes to enhance the mentee's development. The strength of the relationship between a mentor and a mentee may be a catalyst toward the mentee's reaching personal goals and enhancing the grants profession through the mentee's individual development.

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AUTHOR BIO:

Dr. Mollie Bond is the Director of Foundation and Corporate Relations for Moody Bible Institute. She holds a BA in Radio-Television Production from the University of Montana, an MBA from Kansas Wesleyan University, and a doctoral degree in nonprofit leadership from Governors State University. Outside of her role at Moody, Mollie serves in various volunteer roles, including as chair of the Grant Professionals Association Mentor Match Committee. She can be contacted at mollie.bond@moody.edu.