

1 **Title: How I Found a Mentor**

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10 **Conflict of interest statement:** None

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22 **Article Word Count:** 1,700

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This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Alberton, L. F., Rudersdorf, P. D., & Herrmann, J. L. (2017). How I Found a Mentor. *The Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcvs.2017.04.003>

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**Central Message:**

In order to have a successful career in the field of cardiothoracic surgery, forming mentor-mentee relationship is critical, and the benefits of this interaction are unlimited.

**Perspective Statement:**

Finding a mentor can help one navigate the many difficulties faced not only during training but also during one's early stages of their professional career, but this process requires diligence and thoughtfulness on the part of the mentee.

43 Throughout our lives, mentors play essential roles in shaping both our professional career and  
44 personal life. Likewise, mentoring is a time-honored pillar of our surgical training paradigms. Dr. Loop  
45 summarized an effective mentor as someone with high standards of excellence to emulate, “a sponsor, an  
46 advisor, and a model”.<sup>1</sup> A mentor is more than a didactic teacher or technician. A mentor provides an  
47 example of how to conduct one’s professional, clinical, and personal lives and helps one to accomplish  
48 his or her goals in those arenas. A mentor’s role is to cultivate our talents and to improve our weaknesses  
49 and should encourage introspection and self-honesty about one’s talents and abilities. Mentors provide  
50 advice utilizing seniority and experience. This role extends beyond the formal training timeframe and, if  
51 one is fortunate, can last a lifetime.

52 Previous authors have eloquently described the desirable traits and aspects of mentors (Table 1).<sup>1-</sup>  
53 <sup>4</sup> While these may seem intuitive, it can be difficult to find those who possess all these traits.  
54 Furthermore, the impact of a mentor can also vary from a brief period in a particular stage of one’s career  
55 to a lifelong connection that evolves through multiple stages. A self-appraisal checklist for mentors has  
56 been offered by Dr. Pasque, which may be a useful self-reflection tool not only for active mentors, but  
57 also for those in search of a mentor.<sup>2</sup>

58 This piece is written as a combined effort between an adult cardiac surgeon, a congenital heart  
59 surgeon, and a thoracic surgeon as a means of drawing upon personal experiences from different career  
60 paths to distill the concepts and methods we found most useful in our personal searches for mentors.  
61 When considering the broader meaning of a mentor, we agreed that we encountered meaningful mentors  
62 well before our professional education began in the form of parents, teachers, coaches, etc. However, for  
63 the purpose of this article, we chose to focus primarily on the mentors who have helped us during our  
64 surgical training and current practices. Our aim is to provide readers, particularly those currently in  
65 training or early career, a compilation of the methodologies we have found to be most effective for  
66 establishing our personal successful mentor/mentee relationships.

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### 69 **1. Find Commonalities**

70 In the authors' experience, arbitrarily and randomly assigned relationships often do not lead to  
71 effective, long-term mentor/mentee relationships. As with any social relationship, the most meaningful  
72 mentor/mentee relationships arise from common interests that promote collegiality and trust.  
73 Accordingly, identifying a mentor that shares similar personality traits is usually a good first step.  
74 Additionally, successful mentor/mentee relationships are based upon positive professional attributes of  
75 the mentor (e.g., technical mastery, clinical acumen) that are also valued by the mentee. Any common  
76 interests outside the practice of medicine can further bolster this relationship.

### 77 **2. Be Honest with Yourself**

78 Understanding one's personal, professional, and academic goals provides the foundation for any  
79 mentoring relationship regarding one's career. This is true at any stage, whether it be in medical school or  
80 early practice. There is no single correct or best pathway, except that which is best suited for the  
81 individual. Not only does understanding one's goals help to identify potential mentors, but the more  
82 specific these goals are defined, the more effectively a mentor can provide guidance.

83 Another aspect of this is identifying one's knowledge and experience gaps. Because a mentor has  
84 climbed the career ladder beyond you, he or she can help supplement your knowledge and experience,  
85 which may have been tested only to a limited degree previously. The mentor – as a trailblazer – may be  
86 able to smooth the rough areas and lower the mountains for those who follow. Again, successful  
87 mentoring in this regard requires clarity of goals.

### 88 **3. Position Yourself Accordingly**

89 Meeting a potential mentor can occur through a wide range of venues including the ward, the  
90 operating room, lectures, and society meetings. These experiences offer the opportunity to evaluate a  
91 potential mentor in action through performance of those technical, clinical, or research-related tasks that  
92 make them a prime example. Conversely, active participation in these venues by a potential mentee

93 increases his or her exposure to possible mentors. A mentor needs to be able to see potential in the mentee  
94 to develop and maintain a critical level of interest and commitment necessary for effective mentoring.

#### 95 4. **Be Persistent and Own It**

96 As with any endeavor, no one cares more about your success than you do. Tsai and Helsel effectively  
97 argue that mentees must actively seek out these mentored relationships and “own them”.<sup>4</sup> The onus is on a  
98 mentee to foster these relationships, though with due respect for our mentors’ time. Work hard, be honest  
99 and be diligent with the tasks assigned to you. Mentors may lose interest in training mentees if they feel  
100 their time is not being used effectively, and this can be very challenging in the current era of work hour  
101 restrictions.

102 With time, as training and other career circumstances change, it is crucial to sustain those mentoring  
103 connections with periodic updates – both the good and the bad. Not only do mentors appreciate hearing  
104 how his or her mentee is progressing, timely updates can facilitate their guidance. If you are fortunate to  
105 find an effective mentor, do not lose sight of him or her! Maintaining this relationship allows one with  
106 limited experience to practice medicine as if he or she has much more experience, translating into  
107 potentially better outcomes for patients.

#### 108 5. **Understand Your Changing Needs**

109 The value and role of mentors may evolve as one progresses through training and into various career  
110 stages. As one enters practice after successfully completing formalized training, he or she likely does not  
111 possess all the tools necessary to perform the most complex cases. However, the foundational building  
112 blocks are in place. It is likely that one will encounter patients with disease pathology never seen but  
113 discussing these cases with mentors can overcome this obstacle. Therefore, the importance of mentors for  
114 early career cardiothoracic surgeons cannot be overstated. While formalized training programs provide  
115 invaluable technical and clinical exposure, it is not possible to encounter every feasible clinical situation  
116 one may face in his or her own career. Adapting acquired knowledge and skill sets to new situations can  
117 be a formidable process, especially for complex cases. In the current era of outcomes and performance

118 monitoring, achieving successful outcomes is even more important. Discussing cases on a regular basis  
119 preoperatively to identify certain nuances or potential pitfalls may circumvent potentially bad outcomes,  
120 thus further emphasizing the value of learning from other's mistakes and utilizing the mentor's  
121 experience.

## 122 **6. Bring Something to the Table**

123 Even young graduates should not underestimate their skills. The infusion of new skills and  
124 knowledge may be one of the most significant means by which a new surgeon can immediately and  
125 positively enhance a group or program. For thoracic and adult cardiac surgery, this could involve  
126 advanced minimally invasive and robotic techniques. For adult cardiac surgery, advanced wire skills  
127 particularly regarding TEVAR and TAVR may be valuable additions to a group's practice. For congenital  
128 cardiac surgery, even different techniques in operative approaches and clinical management of specific  
129 lesions may help to diversify a group's clinical repertoire. Finding a mentor with similar interests can be  
130 critical to successfully implementing new techniques or knowledge. Particularly as clinical outcomes  
131 become more publicized, it is important to understand the practical feasibility and political climate of an  
132 institution, which can be difficult to do early in practice. An effective mentor can be a tremendous  
133 resource for guidance and assistance to enhance the success of such endeavors while possibly lessening  
134 exposure risk for the mentee.

## 135 **7. Be Humble and Accept Criticism**

136 A key role of an effective mentor is to identify a mentee's weaknesses and help him or her to improve  
137 upon them. Conversely, accepting criticism and working to improve oneself are key to self-growth at any  
138 stage of career development, and these require a certain degree of humility balanced with growing  
139 confidence and skill. In an extreme situation in which a poor clinical outcome outcomes and a mentor  
140 provides political coverage, it is even more essential to extract any constructive and honest criticism from  
141 the mentor while maintaining an appropriate level of humility.

**142 Conclusion**

143       Effective mentors can be key to a successful surgical career, and the lack thereof can present  
144 additional challenges as well as risk to the trainee or young surgeon. A successful mentor-mentee  
145 relationship requires honesty and diligence on the part of the mentee, particularly as one progresses  
146 through training and into clinical practice. The benefits, though, can be invaluable to both parties. Having  
147 a mentor by your side will ease the journey. More than a simple teacher or coach, an effective mentor will  
148 serve as a friend and confidant who will derive extraordinary satisfaction in helping you do what is right  
149 for patients.

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**158 Table 1. Qualities of a Successful Mentor**

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160 Established clinician/researcher

161 Model of work/life balance

162 Willingness to pay back

163 Seniority and security

164 Honest appraiser

165 Trustworthy

166 Goal-setter

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