

## Mentors, be nice

Nathan L Vanderford

**Mentors are essential for the training of PhDs and fellows, but many have lost sight of positive leadership and are just mean.**

Have you had a nice, helpful and inspiring mentor? Has your mentor been supportive of your career aspirations and/or choices? Or has the opposite been true?

I have frequently witnessed and have heard stories of not-so-nice mentors. Graduate school and postdoctoral fellowships can be difficult and defining points in an individual's life, and unfortunately, mean mentors can add to the mental and physical toll experienced by many graduate students and fellows. Some graduate students and fellows have been the subjects of comments such as, "I can train a monkey to do your work," and "I didn't really want you in my lab, but I needed someone to do the work." Such disregard for the human spirit is alarming.

A key aspect of leadership is building followers and developing their skills in ways that keep them engaged and eager to follow the mentor's mission and vision under nearly any circumstance. However, many PhD and postdoctoral mentors are failing in this regard. Ask yourself: if your degree and/or career were not dependent on your mentor, would you continue to follow him or her?

Your mentor's support or disapproval can significantly influence your career opportunities and important networking connections. However, your success will ultimately depend on your own efforts. So when the time is right, consider dumping a mean mentor.

How will you know when the time is right? One suggestion is to work through the pain of



a mean mentor until you finish your degree, reach a good 'stopping point' in your fellowship, connect with a new mentor and/or obtain a new job. Once you cut ties with your mean mentor, you may have to work harder and you may need a little more luck, but if you continuously seek out and surround yourself with smart, supportive people, you will certainly be happier and more successful. Mentors should provide critically insightful advice as you progress through your career; if they are supportive as well, then you will gain bigger economies of scale and scope in your success.

There are supportive PhD and postdoctoral mentors out there—I have met them and seen the fruits of that positive interaction. If you have or have had a nice mentor, then continue to build on that relationship. If you have or have had a mean mentor, prepare to cut ties and move on. Once you do, focus on building supportive connections and creating your own opportunities. Do not let negativity make you

miserable. Be positive about your abilities and skills, go out and succeed at your dreams and remember to be nice to others along the way.

If you are a mentor, please be nice. You may not know what someone else is going through, and your being mean may be the last thing your student or fellow needs. You are in a leadership position, and your followers are watching and depending on you. Their future leadership characteristics will be influenced by your actions.

By striving to be positive, inspiring and motivating, nice mentors will reap more rewards and success, and they will cause far fewer heartaches than their mean colleagues.

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Nathan L. Vanderford is at the Markey Cancer Center, University of Kentucky, Markey Cancer Center, and at Integrative Academic Solutions, Lexington, Kentucky, USA.  
e-mail: [nathan.vanderford@uky.edu](mailto:nathan.vanderford@uky.edu)