

Case Discussion with the author, Mary Blitzer Field

Abstract: In the case of [Dr. Flynn's Mentoring Challenge](#), Assistant Professor Dr. Stephan Flynn was highly recruited for his specialized clinical research expertise. Now, in his new institution, he is having difficulty connecting with mentors. A senior professor with whom he conducts research has expressed an interest in mentoring, but then makes it clear that she wishes “to be the face” on this joint research. Mary Blitzer Field, author of the accompanying article, [Mentors and Protégés: What Protégés Bring to the Equation](#), addresses the core issues of this case.

1. What are the issues in mentoring here?

Stephan's difficulty connecting with any mentors highlights the difficulty junior faculty may experience in establishing mentoring relationships with their senior colleagues, particularly in the competitive culture of top-tier research institutions. His interaction with Dr. Broker at the airport addresses issues of authorship and “face” on research projects in which there is a power differential between collaborators.

2. Why do you think he is having such a difficult time establishing mentoring relationships?

When Stephan e-mails several senior colleagues to ask whether they would be willing to serve as his mentor, they may assume he wants to establish long-term mentoring relationships in which they will provide guidance on every aspect of his career development. Such an expectation may strike busy colleagues as daunting in its scope. Most likely, he would have greater success if he were to request help on a specific project or issue.

Moreover, choosing e-mail as his sole medium for contacting senior colleagues is problematic too. Because e-mail is fairly impersonal, Stephan may feel less vulnerable should his requests be turned down. However, the relative anonymity of e-mail also makes it easier for colleagues to deny his requests. Better that he seek out opportunities to make face-to-face contact with potential mentors.

In fact, Dr. Keither's e-mail leaves the door open for a face-to-face conversation following the next faculty meeting. When Dr. Keither does not show up at the meeting, Stephan should persist in tracking him down for a brief conversation. He may be able to strike up a particularly fruitful relationship with Dr. Keither, for recall that Dr. Keither approaches genetics from the perspective of a basic scientist while Stephan brings his clinical training in cancer genetics to the equation. Working together, Stephan and Dr. Keither may be able to move into translational studies that neither would be able to undertake alone. Reframing the relationship in his own mind not as a burden to Dr. Keither but rather as an opportunity to extend the reach of Dr. Keither's work – and his own – may help Stephan overcome his reluctance to approach this busy senior colleague for guidance. If Dr. Keither indicates that he is interested in working with him, then Stephan should initiate a conversation about their respective roles on any projects they undertake together.

Finally, Stephan may need to adjust his expectations of the mentoring relationship. When he muses, “Not quite what I hoped for,” after he has read Dr. Keither's e-mail, it may be that he is looking for the “fantasy mentor” that some focus group participants described: “The problem with the word ‘mentor’ is that it brings out all these longings and aspirations. It's as though at some level you hope that someone will see you walking down the hall and pluck you out from the crowd, recognizing your intrinsic intellect. You've got to get practical.” If Stephan is to get practical, he needs to make himself visible to potential mentors, deliberately placing himself in their limelight as opportunities arise.

3. Do you agree with his approaches? Why or why not?

Each reader will need to decide for themselves, but one should consider that ultimately, mentoring relationships are highly individual. Only you can decide the best way to approach your senior colleagues for guidance. However, the comments of focus group participants suggest that success is most likely if you are on the lookout for relationships in which your expertise can augment or complement that of your senior colleagues.

By the same token, senior colleagues are likely to be on the lookout for junior faculty who might be interested in working with them. Therefore, you need to keep yourself in their limelight. This means taking every opportunity to talk up your research in person, for example before or after department meetings or over dinner at a national conference. In initiating these conversations, you may find it helpful to remember that people tend to go into academics precisely because of the collegiality and open exchange of ideas that the environment offers. Don't shortchange yourself of opportunities to discuss your research so that you can determine the ways in which it may intersect with others'.

In fact, you may have the greatest success in finding mentors if you set out to form a web of project-driven relationships rather than looking for the ideal mentor. Once you start working together on projects, your shared interests may produce the intense rapport typical of the best mentoring relationships. But even at their best, mentoring relationships may result in misunderstandings if you do not take the time to discuss both parties' roles on projects.

4. How do you think he should respond to Dr. Broker's claim to "be the face" on their research?

Given Dr. Broker's seniority over him, simply nodding and letting her claim drop may appear to be the easiest and least risky response – in the short term. However, consider the long-term consequences if Stephan doesn't address her claim head on: He could end up acquiescing and letting his contributions go unacknowledged with severe consequences to his career, or he could continue to alienate her and ultimately lose her as a mentor.

The best approach is to reply that he takes her concerns seriously and would like to discuss them. He may want to set up a time to meet during the first week they are back at their home institution. This will buy them both some time to step back from the situation and assess it.

Upon reflection, Stephan may discover that during his talk and at dinner, he did not, in fact, acknowledge that Dr. Broker's research gave rise to his line of investigation and that it continues to shape his research. When they meet, he may want to let her know that he recognizes this in hindsight and will acknowledge her role moving forward.

At the same time, he needs to articulate openly and honestly what he views as his unique contributions to their work together. Recall that Dr. Broker chaired the committee that hired him, so presumably she is aware of the expertise he brings to the equation in their collaborative work. He should clearly define what he views as his contributions and let her know that he would like to continue speaking and publishing in this area. He can avoid sounding confrontational if he couches this request in terms of what he needs at this point in his career. As their work together progresses, it may naturally lend itself to publications in which he is first author and she is last or senior author. Over time, as his line of investigation evolves and he becomes more independent, serving as a mentor to others, he should assume senior authorship on some papers. Finally, all parties need to remain open to renegotiating authorship as projects evolve.

Takeaway lessons:

- In general, successful faculty in academic medicine are on the alert for opportunities to shape interactions with their colleagues into win/win situations.
- Despite power differentials between mentors and protégés, protégés need to articulate openly and honestly what they view as their contributions to projects. Both parties need to remain open to renegotiating ownership as authorship evolves.
- Rather than hoping to be approached by the ideal mentor, protégés should work actively to build a network of project-driven mentoring relationships. This means taking every opportunity to talk with colleagues in person about both parties' research.