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Pay It Forward: Mentoring Takes Personal Growth to Next Level

Whether you are a student or a seasoned member, mentoring relationships are an important part of lifelong learning, career development, and personal growth for all of us.

Mentoring takes textbook knowledge to the next level by broadening mentees' insights, developing important "soft" interpersonal skills, building networks, and practicing career-building leadership behaviors. All this is done through the perspective of a respected colleague and role model who is willing to share his or her viewpoints, experiences, empathy, honesty, and time.

It is not just for students or young members. It is for all of us. I have mentored students, interns, and practitioners. It costs nothing but the courage to ask to be mentored and the good will to take the time to help a colleague.

Mentors in turn can benefit personally and professionally through leadership development, broadening of perspectives and personal satisfaction from contributing to the success of others, to name a few. Mentoring is an essential step in the development of members, our profession's diversity and inclusivity, and our organization's future.

The Academy's Mentor Match program connects you with a mentor or mentee who fits your areas of interest, as well as your communication style and availability. And there are other valuable methods of connecting and mentoring, such as the mastermind approach.

I have been fortunate to have many mentors, formal as well as informal. As a young dietitian, I was greatly influenced by one of my chief clinical dietitians, who demonstrated her fortitude, persistence, and commitment to the staff when representing our needs to our department head. I have valued those attributes ever since.

As a hospital foodservice director, it was rare when my assessment of monthly operations or budget proposals was accepted on the first presentation to my chief executive officer. Each time I returned to the chief executive officer's office, I learned to open my eyes to new perspectives and processes and to give up on my attempt for perfection.

The Mastermind Approach

Caroline Passerello, MS, RD, LDN, moderated a session at the 2020 Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo™ virtual event on "Mastering Mastermind Meetings." <https://eatrightfnce.org/sessions/1287848/> FNCE® attendees can view this session on demand until October 2021. Passerello explains the

During my years as an Academy volunteer, I participated as both a mentor and mentee in a formal program organized by the House of Delegates. I credit these experiences with helping me mature into the leader I am today.

At my first House of Delegates meeting as a Texas delegate, my mentor asked me to be the table scribe and verbally report out to the 106 members of the House.

mastermind approach to establishing and maximizing relationships such as mentoring:

Many RDNs pilot a research study or new business idea to ensure it aligns with their intended mission or goal of an organization. I suggest you take your personal goals and missions just as seriously. A mastermind group is a great way to pilot test new ideas or plans for your personal and professional growth.

Being part of a mastermind group is like having a board of advisors and focus group panel all in one. These people will tell you what works and what does not. They will push for your success, be interested in hearing new ideas about where you are headed and will check in with you to hear about your progress.

All of this is only possible if you share the goals and plans you have made. Why is sharing important? Consider this example:

Leading up to a big presentation, anyone who knows you are presenting (boss, neighbor, mom) may say: "You've got this, you'll do great, they're lucky to have you."

A member of your mastermind group may say something like: "You will present such a meaningful message because your delivery is so authentic, and they will benefit from your ability to connect with an audience. You may want to speak slowly; I know you can talk fast when you are excited."

Both responses have the same idea, but one is much more specific, helpful, and inspiring because it is targeted; that person could give such a specific message because he or she *really knows you*. That person is part of a group with whom you can be vulnerable; that vulnerability enables you to be fully present in the group.

Taking this approach to mentorship may yield more targeted feedback and accelerated personal growth. You may already be in a mastermind mentorship relationship and just not call it by that name!

Mentor Match: Sharing and Connecting

Christine Palumbo, MBA, RDN, FAND, has mentored approximately 50 students, interns and young professionals in her career—more than any member who participates in the Academy’s Mentor Match program (<https://community.eatrightpro.org/mentoring>).

“I joined Mentor Match in 2012 as a way to share what I’ve learned from the school of hard knocks with those looking for advice,” Palumbo says. “I’ve continued because I enjoy it. I enjoy virtually meeting members from around the country. I enjoy ‘hearing’ the light bulbs go off when we talk. I enjoy knowing I’ve made a huge difference in a younger person’s life.”

Palumbo’s most recent mentee is Jinan Banna, PhD, RD, CDN, associate professor of human nutrition, food and animal sciences at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. “I used Mentor Match to connect because I have been engaging in entrepreneurial activities lately and saw that Christine has had great success with writing for various publications, speaking and other activities,” Banna says.

“We interact by phone every few weeks. Christine answers my questions and holds me accountable for the tasks we discussed. As a result of our interaction, I have put marketing strategies into place, joined additional professional groups of interest, and even learned how to make a pumpkin spice latte in a novel way (of great interest to my readers),” Banna says.

Palumbo says: “While I don’t know all the solutions, I try to ask the right questions to help me understand the challenges mentees face. I am always honest, too, about where they can improve or their chances of success.”

Through that experience, I learned to confront my self-doubt and trust my authenticity. Not only did I develop confidence in my ability to speak before my peers, but I learned that respectful disagreement is vital to fierce conversations, understanding others’ perspectives and progress toward change. When I became a mentor to other delegates, I shared these experiences and encouraged my mentees to have confidence, ask questions, stand up and speak out. As president-elect, I sought the mentoring of former Academy presidents and others, which benefited me greatly.

I found there was still more to learn about communications, culture, accountability, time management, and enjoyment of the experiences. I am now mentoring our president-elect, Kevin Sauer, PhD, RDN, LD, FAND, and other board members so they can benefit from my experiences and perspectives.

Speaking especially to those who have been mentored, either formally or informally: Now is the time to pay it forward. When you are ready to further enhance your performance, engagement, or career opportunities, reach out and ask to be mentored. Leveraging another’s experience and skills can be transformational.

In addition to the Mentor Match program, the Academy offers many resources for mentors and mentees alike. They include *Journal* articles, blog postings, articles in the *Student Scoop* newsletter, and many more. Visit www.eatrightPRO.org/practice/career-development/mentoring-networking-and-volunteering/ementoring-and-mentoring-resources.

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