

Facilitated Peer Group Mentoring: A Case Study of Creating Leadership Skills Among the Associate Program Directors of the APPD

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Academic Pediatrics 2010;10:161–4

It is well recognized that academic faculty benefit from mentoring relationships in order to achieve their professional goals, facilitate their scholarly productivity, and make meaningful contributions to their colleagues, trainees, institutions, and departments. Junior faculty are faced with many challenges in developing effective mentoring relationships, including lack of available senior faculty members with proper skill sets or interest in mentorship.

Although many mentoring models exist, the most commonly pursued by academic faculty is dyadic mentoring. In traditional dyadic mentoring, one mentor is matched with one mentee (often geographically) based on common interests. Ideally, the dyad participates in a bidirectional relationship. There is a growing body of evidence that other innovative mentoring models, such as facilitated peer group mentoring (FPGM), may be more successful.¹ In FPGM, a senior mentor is assigned to a small group of mentees. The group members serve as peer mentors to each other while working on common interests or projects. The process is facilitated by the senior mentor, who may or may not be a content expert. In this paper, we discuss a case study in which effective, productive mentoring was provided through the use of FPGM. This case study involving associate program directors is illustrative of a successful mentoring experience that resulted in academic productivity and enhanced leadership skills. Associate program directors are involved directly in the

implementation of educational projects within residency programs. As a group, they are often younger and may have had fewer leadership experiences than program directors. The model of FPGM is well suited to a group of associate program directors working together toward a common goal.

ASSOCIATE PROGRAM DIRECTOR FACILITATED PEER MENTORING GROUP

In the spring of 2007, a special interest group (SIG) of associate residency program directors was formed to promote the unique needs of associate program directors in the Association of Pediatric Program Directors (APPD). During the first 2 SIG meetings, (spring 2007 and spring 2008), the leaders conducted focus groups to determine member priorities and needs. SIG members prioritized a list of faculty development topics. In particular, they identified academic mentorship as an important need. In a 2007 internal electronic survey of associate program directors, only 44% of respondents reported that they had an academic mentor. In the summer of 2008, 6 associate program directors volunteered to form a FPGM, with the goal to conduct a workshop at the 2009 spring APPD meeting. The group decided to focus the workshop on leadership skills, one of the prioritized faculty development topics identified by associate program director SIG members. Quickly the group narrowed the focus to leading from the middle, a necessary skill for the successful associate program director.

Over the course of the ensuing months, the FPGM met via conference calls and completed the following tasks: 1) group members' roles were defined, including appointment of 2 workshop leaders; 2) goals and objectives of workshop were constructed; 3) the workshop abstract was written and submitted; and 4) the workshop was planned. Throughout the development and execution phases of the workshop planning, the 2 SIG leaders served as mentors to the entire work group and to the 2 workshop leaders in particular, providing them with guidance in leading the project, including conducting conference calls,

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drafting minutes, managing group dynamics, and planning. Additionally, during the process another senior member was consulted as a content expert.

Outcomes of FPGM include the following: 1) the successful delivery of a workshop at the APPD spring meeting in 2009; 2) the submission, acceptance, and delivery of a modified version of the workshop at the Association of American Medical Colleges meeting in November 2009; and 3) the submission and acceptance of a modified version of the workshop at the Pediatric Academic Societies meeting in May 2010. The group participants expanded their efforts, forming a professional network that has resulted in a community of scholars who provide mutual support, rewarding collaboration, opportunities for scholarly projects, as well as offering additional leadership opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

Need for a Common Project/Goal

Several important considerations should be highlighted from this experience. The identification of a common project or goal is a critical step in the FPGM model. As adult learners, peer mentors are driven by a need to generate practical knowledge that they can readily apply. Identification of this common project or goal creates a concrete context in which the group can work. Senior mentors can guide peer group leaders to apply skills within this group, including conducting and facilitating conference calls, leading discussions, resolving conflicts, organizing team roles, communicating information, and creating and submitting academic abstracts, such as workshops or presentations. Peer mentoring has been used successfully by internal medicine programs with junior faculty, which resulted in successful outputs by peer groups.² In addition to offering an opportunity to apply newly acquired skills, selecting a common project or goal provides incentive and direction for peer group participants. Peer group participants are rewarded with academic productivity, which may assist them in promoting their academic careers and may lead to program improvements. These positive outputs may encourage peer group participants to engage in future peer groups, leading to sustained relationships, collaboration, and experience that could translate into the developing of future peer mentors.

Importance of Planned, Regular Communication

An important element in the group's structure is that the peer mentoring group functioned as a virtual team. *Virtual teams* are defined as a group of individuals who are temporally and/or geographically dispersed and are dependent upon telecommunication or other information technologies for communication that is often asynchronous.³ The benefits of a virtual team include the ability to select members with various knowledge bases, bringing a diversity of perspective without geographic constraints. The loss of usual face-to-face contact with teammates can shift team dynamics. Learning to communicate effectively without the usual social nonverbal cues may require additional

concerted efforts during early team building efforts. Therefore, it is probably more important that these virtual teams, as opposed to teams that are located in the same institution, have shared clarity of project goals. Communication of defined goals helps ensure everyone is "on the same page" and focused on the desired outputs. Regular communication is vital to integrate individual knowledge bases, discuss common goals, ensure timely completion of tasks, and make group decisions regarding proposed modifications of plans or elements of the work product.

The peer mentoring group chose weekly telephone conference calls as the primary means of communication. Having a set scheduled time underscored the importance of the group meeting, and all members felt accountable to the group to have completed their assigned tasks by the next conference meeting. As the project unfolded and initial hurdles were successfully maneuvered, members became accustomed to working independently, and calls were spaced to every 2 weeks. The focus of the calls always included the following categories: 1) overall project status and current agenda; 2) individual reports of progress on assigned tasks; 3) presentation of any new important information or resources a group member had discovered; 4) discussion of any proposed modifications to the overall goals; 5) identification of next steps and assignments of tasks; and 6) closure with summary of decisions, action items, and review of assignments. The calls were followed by an e-mail to all members of the group with minutes of the meeting including the agreed-upon assignments for the next week. Regular communication via calls, electronic minutes, and electronic working documents served to keep everyone focused on the goals and established trust among group members that each individual was contributing to the final output. Of note, despite the fact that the group had its first face-to-face meeting on the day prior to the first workshop presentation, there were successful group dynamics throughout the experience.

BENEFITS TO THE GROUP MEMBERS

The benefits of the peer mentoring model to each group member are significant and ongoing (Table). The formation of the peer mentoring group allowed each member to network with a group of people with similar interests but who had very different skill sets. Use of experienced mentors, as well as the collective skills of the group, led to the development of a quality work product in the area of faculty development of leadership skills. This collaboration has furthered each member's academic productivity, as the group presented 2 workshops at national meetings and has a third workshop accepted for presentation. Several members of the peer mentoring group have established new collaborations with members of the group, which have led to further academic productivity, including an editorial role as a section editor for a textbook. Two members of the peer mentoring group are developing a second project with the senior mentors, who have connected them with a new working group that includes national leaders in the medical education field. Finally,

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