

The Frances Maitland Memorial Lecture 2002
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Editor's note: Marcella Hollinger gave the Frances M. Maitland Memorial Lecture at the 27th Annual Alliance conference to emphasize the value and importance of mentoring newcomers to CME/Alliance. The following is her lecture.

First I want to say thank you to Merck for its sponsorship of this lecture, honoring both Frances Maitland and the role of mentors. Secondly, I want to say how very honored I am to be receiving this award named after Frances Maitland. Probably most of you don't know who Frances Maitland was. Frances Maitland was very instrumental in the formation of the Alliance. She became the first full-time executive director of the Alliance and a driving force behind CME. She was the quintessential woman—a recognized leader in the field of CME, well read, well spoken, well traveled, a gourmand, a beautiful lady, a mentor to countless CME professionals, and a friend. Her untimely death in 1998 left an irreplaceable void for many of us in CME.

However, the most interesting thing about Frances for me is that she was not a mentor to me. No, standing before you is a second-generation mentee. I am the CME off-spring of the CME off-spring of Frances. And for the wonderful job she did of mentoring my mentors, I will always be grateful to her. But then, I suppose that is the essence of mentoring—to not only pass along knowledge or skills to others, to not only help others problem-solve, but to influence these others to be knowledgeable enough and confident enough and caring enough to be mentors too.

And so what I would like to do is talk to you about being a mentor. If you are looking for a mentor, what are the characteristics to look for, or if someday you become a mentor, what are the characteristics you should cultivate? Sometimes, without realizing it, you become someone's advisor. Having been both a mentee and a mentor, here are some traits I think are important for the job and traits you should look for if you seek a mentor.

First, be approachable. In my role as Director of Accreditation for the Illinois State Medical Society, I am the state equivalent of the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME). Providers call me all the time and sometimes they start the conversation by saying, "This is a dumb question, but, . . ." To me, there are no dumb questions, and I tell them that. For those just starting out, even the smallest issue can be difficult to address. I want them to know that calling me about any educational or accreditation issue is okay, and that the question is not how important I think the issue is, but whether it is important to them. I also involve them in the problem-solving or brainstorming or just thinking out loud. I want them to know that their input is valuable, even if it is only a little input. I feel I am in a particularly sensitive situation, since most people who call me are those providers the Illinois State Medical Society accredits. I want people to feel that they can ask me questions, even if they think the situation is iffy, and not feel that somehow the information will be used against them. If people think they put themselves in jeopardy, then I fail, mostly because they may be doing something inappropriate or out of compliance. Then the damage is done.

Second, be available. I know people wouldn't call if the problem wasn't immediate, so I make it a point to call them back or e-mail them as quickly as possible. I am always gratified when they say, "Thanks for getting back to me so quickly." I try to reinforce this whenever possible. I tell people, "Don't ever hesitate to call or e-mail me." Look for teachable moments, particularly if you are mentoring someone who works with or for you. The hard part is that the teachable moment may not occur at the most opportune time for you. Make the time because it can make for the best and most enduring learning for the mentee.

Be patient. Sometimes people don't know what they don't know and so expressing the issue is

tough. I ask questions, I try to clarify the issue. I repeat it back. I say, “Let me make sure I have this straight, the issue is....” Take the time to explain. In a mentoring situation, I think one of the most important traits is to be willing to share the reasoning, the theory, the background, etc. with your mentee. Helping people achieve a depth of knowledge is important—it’s what leads them to become knowledgeable and confident, and this leads to producing good CME.

Sometimes you’ll have to share the same thing more than once. Sometimes your mentee won’t want to hear it. That’s okay, just be patient and positive and keep at it. Don’t always be the expert. A good mentor is one that helps the mentee to reach his or her own solution. Instead of giving the answer right off the bat, ask clarifying questions and help people to weigh options that they identify. Help them think it through first; offer your suggestions later. Be a resource; better still be resourceful. It’s good to be known as an expert, but don’t be afraid to say you don’t know. But if you don’t know, know who to call or where to go for information.

Listen. Sometimes all people want is an opportunity to talk. They don’t need you to give them an answer or your opinion. Sometimes, I call a fellow CME-er to talk just because I need to hear out loud what I’m thinking. It helps to clarify my thoughts. It is not always easy to not give my opinion. I have to bite my tongue and say, “So what do you think you should do?” The corollary to this is to know when to stay neutral and let the mentee assess the options.

Sometimes the best advice is no advice. Make sure you know the facts, but the best help you can give a mentee is the opportunity to reach his or her own decisions. My way is not the only way. We all have preferences. Be aware of yours and just don’t impose them on others. For example, suppose someone designs a CME brochure and brings it to you for input. Chances are he wants assurance that he has got all the right information. But let’s say that it isn’t laid out in the way that you like to have the information appear. As long as the message isn’t wrong, let the design be. If you want people to achieve, then they must find their own way. Besides, you may find you’ll learn something new, too.

Be empathetic. I try to remember what it feels like for you, now, as you come into CME—new people, new language, new acronyms, lots of questions, lots of first times to have to deal with. Sometimes all somebody wants is a sympathetic ear. Sometimes people come to me so they can find out if I have handled a similar problem. Recently, a new CME coordinator asked me about joint sponsorship with an organization that wanted to hold several CME activities, one of which would be in a hotel. She had never done this before. I could hear the hesitation in her voice when we talked about doing the off-site activity. I gave her the assurance that it was okay not to do it. She will get there eventually, but she needs to take her time.

Help people fail forward. Not every experience is a winning situation. Sometimes the best thing I can do for someone is to help that person see at least one positive aspect of a bad situation, and to put that one bad experience in the context of the bigger picture. When someone is at a low point, I try to pick them up and get them going again. And if there is nothing I can do to help, then I just listen.

So these are the traits I think a mentor should have. Now, I also think there are traits of a good mentee that help to make the mentoring process as successful as possible, and I would like to take a couple of minutes to share these with you.

First, be as prepared as possible. It helps if you have already thought about options and can give me, your mentor, some idea of what those are. This speeds the process, but also gives me insights into your experience and knowledge. However, if you really are stymied, don’t feel that I, as your mentor, am disappointed. In those cases, I would rather you come to me sooner than later. Second, network as much as possible. Different people have differing skills, abilities, and expertise. The more people you can call upon, the richer your learning experience will be.

Be inquisitive. Find out why things are done a certain way or what a particular theory means, etc. You can’t be confident about your choices unless you know the reasoning behind it.

Take the initiative, particularly when you get a little more experienced. It's always a good sign to me when you are willing to move ahead on your own. So, these are my thoughts about being a good mentor and being a good mentee.

Well, I am almost done. So I would like to end by thanking all the people who have mentored me. Thank you to those whose knowledge and resourcefulness helped guide me to the right information. Thank you to those whose creativity helped to spark my thinking and draw out my creativity too. Thank you to those who listened to me and let me reach the right conclusion on my own. Thank you to those who have shown me the great joy of collaboration, not only because collaboration is a skill I value, but also because the product of such collaboration is usually so much better than anything I could have come up with on my own. Thank you to those who helped me up when I failed and helped me to find the positive lesson in my failure. My professional time in CME has been a more positive, more productive experience because of my mentors—I honestly could not have done it without them. I won't name names, but they know who they are.

Trust me, it seems like yesterday that I was sitting where you are sitting now. Before long, I expect I'll see one of you up here, talking to new recruits about mentoring. And so the circle continues, and Frances lives on. Thank you.