

NIH Management Cadre Program

Guidelines for the Preceptor/Mentor Relationship

Background

The NIH Management Cadre Program is designed to train and qualify current GS-12-, 13-, and 14-level NIH employees for leadership positions. The program seeks to enhance the career growth and potential of all program participants as well as meet the future leadership staffing needs of the NIH. While continuing to perform the duties and responsibilities of their current positions, program participants are given a variety of opportunities including on-the-job training, academic courses, and selected short assignments, to assist in preparing them for the role of leader.

A key component of this developmental program is the establishment of two crucial relationships. The purpose of these relationships is to provide support to the program participants in different areas of their professional development. A preceptor relationship is established to assist participants in furthering the development of their knowledges, skills, and abilities in tangible areas such as technical expertise. A mentor relationship is also established to assist the participants in furthering the development of their professional growth in intangible areas such as professional image and demeanor. While the two relationships may functionally overlap with a participant, the two different relationships are intended to:

- C acknowledge that a single mentor may not be able to address every need participants have;
- C allow participants to experience different leadership styles; and
- C afford participants an opportunity to expand their network of technical resource

Overview of the Preceptor/Mentor Relationships

Program participants can select one individual to serve as their preceptor and another to serve as their mentor. Both of these individuals should commit to serve throughout the duration of the Program. However, the relationships will be re-evaluated quarterly and may change based on the participants=career development needs.

There are a number of characteristics common to both of these distinctly different relationships. Both relationships are developed on a personal and a professional level, evolving over time, the nature of which is dependent upon the needs of the program participant. Although the preceptor will serve in more of a teaching role while the mentor will serve in an advisory capacity, both will

provide information and support to the participant. In both relationships, the preceptor/mentor should make every effort to know, accept, and respect the goals and interests of the program participant and continually nurture self-sufficiency on the part of the participant. Hopefully, both relationships will also contain the following essential ingredients: respect, trust, partnership-building, and realistic expectations.

Both the preceptor and the mentor should take their role seriously and be willing to devote the time and resources necessary to carry out their responsibilities. Their relationship with the program participant should be one that is open, frank, and direct, and, at the same time, supportive and encouraging. The role of both the preceptor and the mentor is that of an advisor to the program participant and therefore both should be conscious of any tendencies to direct the participant to take a specific course of action. An atmosphere should be cultivated in which issues are addressed by the preceptor/mentor as well as the participant. The preceptor/mentor should encourage feedback from the program participant in terms of the relationship to ensure the needs of the participant are being met.

Both the preceptor and the mentor need to ensure that communication with the program participant is on a regular and continuing basis. In conjunction with the participant, the amount and frequency of meetings and other means of communication should be discussed at the very beginning of the relationship. If at all possible, meetings should take place on neutral ground to minimize interruptions.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Preceptor

The major objective of the preceptor relationship is to provide support to the program participant in his/her career development in a specific occupational field. Thus, the role of the preceptor is fairly well-defined, and will include such responsibilities as the following:

- C Assists in strategizing about career goals
- C Assists in developing skills to find a job, targeting specific areas, resume writing, interviewing techniques
- C Helps with selecting courses
- C Suggests work experiences appropriate to career goals
- C Makes contacts/introductions to facilitate rotational assignments
- C Makes contacts and provides introductions for building professional network
- C Provides ongoing technical advice and guidance in the specific subject matter area

Roles and Responsibilities of the Mentor

The major objective of the mentor relationship is to provide support to the program participant in his/her professional development in such areas as professional conduct, image, and presentation. Some of the responsibilities of the mentor include the following:

- C Shares organizational knowledge, including tradition and values, providing guidance on the organizational culture and the inner workings of the office (i.e., “office politics”), unwritten rules, etc.
- C Serves as resource person, putting participant in touch with resources for information, ideas, etc.
- C Encourages networking, making contacts and providing introductions for building professional relationships
- C Helps develop such skills as careful planning and use of time, organization, communication skills, people skills, leadership, teamwork, creative thinking
- C Serves as a role model, teaching and demonstrating high standards of performance as well as ethical conduct
- C Advises on the effective balancing of work and personal life
- C Advises on the importance of participating in professional organizations
- C Analyzes strengths and weaknesses, assists in the undertaking of other activities to improve in weak areas, motivates to keep trying for excellence, and evaluates performance in moving toward his/her goals
- C Serves as an objective outsider, capable of helping the participant to step back and see things from another perspective

Characteristics of a Preceptor/Mentor

While a number of personal and professional character traits are important for effective mentoring, the following are the more prominent characteristics of both a preceptor and a mentor:

- C Has achieved a position of relative stature in the organization, having earned the respect of peers, the organization, and/or community

- C Possesses a desire to share “life experiences” along with a desire to help others
- C Is genuinely interested in people and has effective people skills: can effectively communicate and actively listen; can resolve conflict and give appropriate feedback
- C Is an achiever, setting lofty career goals, continually evaluating them, and striving to reach them; usually takes on more responsibility than is required; volunteers for more activities; climbs the career ladder quickly and inspires others to do the same
- C Is a person of high integrity
- C Values and takes pride in NIH and its work; understands its mission, vision and values, and supports its initiatives