

What Being a Peer-to-Peer Mentor Offers - Perspective from an Individual Project Level Contributor

LaNae Schaal, AstraZeneca

ABSTRACT

Typically, mentoring is done to help a person obtain skills to climb the career ladder. The traditional concept of mentoring is a structured relationship in which a senior individual imparts wisdom to a less experienced individual. For statistical programming, this could involve someone from a management level or a subject matter expert meeting with a more junior programmer. That hierarchical understanding overlooks a second possible structure for mentoring: peer-to-peer. Two individuals similarly situated in an organization committing to regular mentoring meetings. For example, a study level Senior Statistical Analyst serving as mentor to a Senior Statistical Programmer on a different study. During the last 7 years, I have participated in both types of mentoring relationships.

This paper will briefly address components of effective peer-to-peer meetings. Then I will outline how being the mentor for peer-to-peer mentees has helped me develop professionally. For example, I have

- a) developed leadership skills such as communication and listening,
- b) broadened my understanding of the career opportunities in Biometrics,
- c) improved self-awareness, and
- d) increased job satisfaction.

As you explore professional development for yourself or your organization, please consider how peer-to-peer mentoring can be beneficial where you currently are.

INTRODUCTION

During my seven-year career as a Pharmaceutical Statistical Programmer, I have had different types of mentoring relationships. Every mentoring relationship has a specific purpose: to share knowledge that will encourage career maturation. At times, the knowledge can be intellectual with the desired outcome of building technical problem-solving skills. Other times, a mentorship focuses on relational knowledge with the goal of learning the “unwritten” rules of corporate culture. Less frequently, a mentorship focuses on developing the knowledge to decide about making a change to a new career. Regardless of the type of knowledge transferred, every mentorship consists of at least two people: a mentee and a mentor. Conventionally, the mentor and mentee have a large disparity between their industry experience and position in the organization. Less common is the peer-to-peer mentorship, where both participants share matching levels in the organization and similar years of experience. I have participated in both conventional and peer-to-peer mentorships with a variety of types of knowledge sharing. After briefly addressing components of effective mentoring meetings, I will discuss how being the mentor for peer-to-peer mentees has helped me develop professionally.

For both conventional and peer-to-peer mentoring to be effective, three hallmarks must exist. Most important, the person seeking mentoring must clarify what he or she is seeking from a mentoring relationship. This allows the meetings to have a specific purpose and helps define when the mentorship can successfully come to closure. Additionally, this clarity will guide what type of mentor to initiate contact with. Next, a successful mentorship will have a good connection between the individuals: complimentary communication styles, identical commitment for time engagement (both frequency and duration), and similar depth of trust and transparency. Lastly, the mentorship should be mutually beneficial for both participants. Typically, a mentorship involves a recurring time commitment. When the relationship is not mutually beneficial, the mentoring can end prematurely causing it to be ineffective.

MENTORSHIP EXAMPLES

Consider a safety programmer who struggles with programming efficacy datasets and outputs for complex endpoints. This person will benefit from a relationship with an experienced, patient efficacy programming expert who has availability in his or her schedule. Approaching a line manager to be a mentor for this intellectual knowledge transfer will likely not be beneficial. A better idea is to reach out to a colleague to schedule a series of meetings. It is important to identify what the mentee is seeking: an understanding of the thought processes that the individual uses when building the code (not simply sample code). The communication style of the mentor is important to establishing a feeling of safety which encourages the mentee to ask questions when he or she does not understand. If the mentee perceives that the mentor's coding style is the 'right' way and discussions have a "Guess what I am thinking" undertone, then the mentee will not risk thinking independently. A mentor with an appropriate communication style will review the mentee's proposed programming. The mentor can ask about the assumptions the programmer had when working on the code. The mentor can affirm how the mentee's thinking agrees with the protocol/Statistical Analysis Plan. If the logic is correct but the execution differs from the mentor's preferred coding, the mentor should refrain from making suggestions. Only when the logic is in error should the mentor give recommendations. These recommendations should focus on what the mentor has neglected to consider and how it impacts the final interpretation of the results. For a project level programmer who is functioning as a mentor this exchange is beneficial because they are gaining/practicing delegation skills relevant at the managerial level.

Now consider an experienced SAS® programmer who has a novel programming concept that he/she wants to introduce for department-wide use. A mentoring relationship will help the individual learn how to navigate the path from the 'proof-of-concept' to implementation stage. Both types of mentorships, hierarchical and peer-to-peer, can be successful. When approaching potential mentors, clarity of purpose is vital. The reason for either mentorship will be to evaluate whether and how to pursue this project. The mentee identified a need for "buy-in" to the project and wants to determine the critical influencers in the department. Having this clarification will prevent misunderstandings that lead to mentor meetings consumed by discussions of the details of/improvement to the project. A hierarchical mentor will have relevant input, but getting a good connection may be challenging. Among managers and organizational leaders there is a variety of communication styles so finding the right fit is possible. However, finding an accessible individual who could be fully transparent about departmental information may be the challenge. A peer mentor who has attempted a similar endeavour can have useful insight. He or she may have more availability than a manager. Given that your project is not competing with your peer's, transparency should be a non-issue. Your peer can be motivated by the ability to reflect on his or her experience and use it to the benefit of others. Additionally, knowing that his or her knowledge is desired builds confidence in the mentor.

REFLECTION ON BEING A PEER-TO-PEER MENTOR

With these two examples, I have clarified the concept of peer-to-peer mentoring. Mentorship is different than a friendship. The relationship has a very specific goal: sharing knowledge that encourages another person's career maturation. I emphasize that the goal is not to encourage the mentee's career maturation. Both mentor and mentee will mutually benefit from a successful mentorship. Reflecting on the different peer-to-peer mentorships in which I served as a mentor, I find these professional benefits: a) developing leadership skills, b) broadening my understanding of Biometrics, c) improving self-awareness, and d) increasing my job satisfaction.

Being a mentor requires leadership skills not required when I am a "heads down" programmer. Effective mentors guide the mentee to find his or her own solutions, rather than presenting the mentee with a ready-made solution. This requires focusing on the mentee and being mindful of their perspective. A consequence of this mindfulness is I have improved my communication and listening skills. Rather than 'telling', I focus on using communication that seeks information, restates and summarizes to ensure correct comprehension of the mentee's thoughts and experience. When I feel the urge to give advice, I intentionally refrain and consider whether this is my solution to the situation. If so, then I need to allow for the possibility that the mentee will create a different solution that is most appropriate for him or her. I need to communicate my experience as only one possibility. Then provide other elements for the mentee to consider that could lead him or her to a more personally appropriate conclusion.

I regularly asked questions of mentees to understand the working environment that they experienced. From mentees outside of my project, I have surmised that my project work provides only limited contact with the breadth of opportunities in Biometrics and beyond. Business goals, the required skills (technical and soft), leadership styles, and team dynamics vary substantially among departments. Having awareness of this variety is informing my plans for career development. As a programmer, do I want to continue to be clinical trial focused or do I pivot to work in a non-project area such as Data Visualization? On clinical trials, the primary language is SAS®. But for non-regulatory jobs other languages, like RStudio® or Python®, may be more dominant. Some departments/Therapeutic Areas have smaller/larger teams. Do I want to work with a different size team to have a greater influence or impact? Asking questions to my mentees, exposed me to new possibilities and sparked an internal assessment of my career path.

A good mentoring relationship includes understanding each other as human beings. By having more personal conversations with mentees, I have come to understand myself better. What are the things that we value and motivate each of us, for example family, recognition, or intellectual curiosity? Sometimes I have encountered a world view that challenged me. After continued reflection, I understood that I had assumptions about the world that were not universal. But the human connection is not the only element that increased my self-awareness. Trust and honesty are important to mentoring relationships. From peers to whom I was mentoring for intellectual knowledge, I received some honest observations about my ignorance of “unwritten” corporate rules. Even though this was beyond the scope of the mentoring relationship, the feedback was probably mutually beneficial allowing us both to simultaneously fill the role of mentor.

A final benefit of peer-to-peer mentoring has been increased job satisfaction. Connecting with my peers leaves me with a sense of belonging within the organization. I see my impact in areas beyond the project that I am moving from one milestone to the next.

CONCLUSION

As you explore professional development for yourself or your organization, please consider how peer-to-peer mentoring can be beneficial where you currently are. Peers are usually more accessible and have a wealth of experience, whether it be from their current position or prior life experiences. Whether you serve as the mentor or mentee, you can develop in meaningful ways for your career.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

LaNae Schaal
AstraZeneca
lanae.schaal@astrazeneca.com

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