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Why you need a support team

Forming a network of peers, says **Ruth Gotian**, can help you with career guidance.

It's imperative to have a 'personal advisory board'. This is a group of dependable, reliable, clear-eyed peers — who can be nearby or scattered worldwide — from whom you can seek advice, counsel, support and perspective (and to whom you can in turn offer those things). Sometimes, perhaps even often, others' points of view can help to inform your own decisions, and can prompt you to find a solution to what might otherwise have seemed an insurmountable obstacle.

I've found my own personal advisory board to be indispensable over the nearly 25 years since I created it. For example, as a university administrator, I was in the middle of a job search two years ago when I realized that I wanted to

go in a different direction. I was having trouble distinguishing what I excelled in from what I was passionate about. I needed perspective.

So I called, texted and e-mailed members of my board. In my case, these are colleagues from across the United States whom I trust, whose professional roles are similar to mine and who speak my academic vernacular. They are the people to whom I can always turn to give and seek support across many levels: career and job-related guidance; important data on admissions, budgets, curriculum and similar topics; and crucial perspective on almost anything. They are as helpful today as they were when we first met in summer 1997.

In 1996, I had just started a new role

managing an MD–PhD programme at a large US medical school. Armed with the requisite education, relevant experience and a strong sense of tenacity, I felt I was up to the task.

My first project was to organize and host an interview day for 25 applicants who would be arriving three weeks later. Five months after that, I was to lead a summer programme for a dozen undergraduates who were interested in careers as physician–scientists. A month after their departure, I was due to submit my first competitive training grant to the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), which would fund the tuition, stipends and training-related expenses for the students in the MD–PhD programme. ►

► All of this had to be done even as I carried on with my daily duties of dealing with student affairs, budgets, fellowship applications and crisis management. (And there was always a crisis.) During my first 11 months on the job, I felt that I was capable of doing it all — but I wasn't cognizant of what I didn't know.

And I felt like I was constantly putting out fires. I was navigating through unwritten rules and unforeseen challenges, such as trying to find opportunities for the programme and its students, including funding sources, relevant conferences and network development.

Our office received hundreds of admission applications for the MD–PhD programme within 72 hours of the deadline. We had to process them all, and invite applicants for interviews, within two to three weeks. I was mentoring and supporting students through the emotional toll of selecting a thesis laboratory while persuading would-be applicants that they were qualified to apply to the MD–PhD programme. I also had to learn how to maintain regular contact with our growing alumni pool, market the programme and seek new funding sources for it.

The to-do list was endless, and I always had countless balls in the air.

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

After a harrowing year in this position, I called a colleague at another institution who had been doing this same sort of work for decades. It turned out that we were both scheduled to attend the same upcoming conference. Two months after our phone conversation, we met in Aspen, Colorado, at the base of a mountain. Over dinner, I peppered her with ceaseless questions about admissions, alumni tracking, recruiting and staying on top of data collection for institutional NIH training grants, the largest government funding source for MD–PhD training programmes and an unofficial seal of approval for a quality programme.

My colleague, in turn, revealed things I hadn't considered, such as resources for finding alumni, and the names of prominent faculty members and administrators in our professional MD–PhD society whom I needed to get to know. We later joined other participants at the conference and, for me, that was the beginning of the beginning. It was there that I formed my advisory panel.

My success, capacity for clear thinking and sanity would have been greatly compromised were it not for this group. My team mates patiently provided unending tips on how to manage admissions, on how to prepare those pesky NIH training grants (and deal with detailed data tables), and on which statistics I should always have at my fingertips, such as the number of students in the programme, broken down into every imaginable category.

They also warned me of the challenges for which I should prepare, such as finding a new lab for a student when their principal investigator leaves the institution; supporting



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A support team can offer researchers guidance and counsel.

now-struggling students who had always been at the top of their class; and helping students to overcome impostor syndrome.

Before long, I became an organizer of that conference and began to offer my own valuable contributions to my advisory team. With more experience and insight, I was able to provide tips on how to effectively recruit under-represented students, how to launch and run a successful pre-MD–PhD summer programme, how to re-imagine my institution's annual student retreat and how to skilfully track and engage alumni. Advisory-team members have become a source of boundless information, co-presenters at conferences and good friends.

EVERYONE CAN BENEFIT

Over the span of two decades, it's become clear to me that scientists at every career stage would benefit greatly from a similar group. It allows for the free exchange of knowledge and information, and provides opportunities for group members to develop and to receive peer mentoring in person and virtually.

My team helped me to understand and learn poorly communicated and poorly documented yet crucial information, ranging from funding opportunities and calls for papers to upcoming recruitment conferences and speakers I should listen to or invite. The members are also experts on new or obscure regulations, such as the criteria for eligibility of an under-represented minority student for federal training grants, or how to identify students with disabilities while adhering to privacy-law restrictions. We also help one another during challenging times, such as dealing with the death of a student or with gnarly faculty members.

Having my team available to me eliminated my need to reinvent the wheel and created a sounding board for re-imagining ideas. When I was faced, for example, with the task of searching for alumni, my board provided samples of their own surveys and proven ideas

for where and how to search for past students. I was able to enhance our collective knowledge by offering ideas such as searching on accreditation databases, in publication warehouses such as PubMed and in funding repositories such as the NIH Reporter.

Whether in person or by phone, Skype, FaceTime or text, being able to confer with these colleagues who understand the trials and tribulations of my work has helped me to combat burnout, a sense of isolation and impostor syndrome, and to boost my morale during challenging times. The perspective that my team members have provided has helped me to excel. They elegantly taught me how to say 'no' to unreasonable requests or ungrounded appeals for extensions. I was concerned that I'd drop one of the many balls I was juggling, and they helped me to stay on point.

Researchers are part of a vast global scientific community. There are countless national and regional groups to which you can subscribe. These groups might be based on your occupation, administrative role, gender or ethnicity. If one does not exist, launch one. It doesn't have to be international — you can start within your own institution.

After mentoring students for more than two decades, I now mentor faculty members at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City through our newly launched Mentoring Academy, where I help them to succeed and to become leaders in health care, science and education.

One of my first items of business was to reach out to leaders at other institutions for their shared wisdom on effective programmes, approaches, speakers and funding sources. I anticipate the day that I can pay those insights forward. ■

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