



# USGS Mentoring Program

## Mentor Handbook

*"Fit and chemistry must be considered when pairing the mentor and the protégé.  
If the two don't get along, it matters little what each can offer the other  
in terms of knowledge and skills."*

—Michael Zey, Building a Successful Formal Mentor Program

As a mentor, you will invest your time, energy and expertise to nurture the growth of another person. You are the special person who helps others reach their potential. Your style may range from that of a persistent encourager who boosts self-confidence to that of a stern taskmaster who teaches a protégé to appreciate excellence in performance. Whatever your style, it is your care that really matters.

Mentoring is an all-encompassing way to encourage personal growth. Mentoring is often spoken about in corporate circles, but the impact of mentoring can be much deeper than just job skills. Mentors can touch every facet of a protégé's being if the protégé accepts and applies the mentor's wisdom in diverse ways. It is a process in which the mentor and protégé work together to discover and develop the protégé's latent abilities and encourage the protégé to acquire knowledge and skills as opportunities arise. The mentor serves as a tutor, counselor, and friend, enabling the protégé to sharpen skills and increase knowledge.

The following guidelines will help you make the best of your **mentoring relationship**.

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## Getting Acquainted

Online messaging is an unthreatening, flexible way to ease into a relationship with a new person. Many people find it easier to open up to someone new through writing.

- Use email, Google chat or Webex conferencing to get to know each other, plan meetings and discuss progress on tasks and milestones. To break the ice, ask your mentor questions and share a little about yourself:
- Jobs, hobbies, and extracurricular activities
- Research, projects, or career-related accomplishments
- Ways of balancing work with your personal life

- Your favorite class in college, favorite book, favorite movie, etc.

As you get to know each other better, your protégé is encouraged to voice concerns regarding their goals. In some cases you may need to take the initiative to help your protégé express these uncertainties. If your protégé lacks the lexicon to discuss certain issues with you, he or she may try to paraphrase. Be sure that you understand what your protégé is trying to say. Although it might take several discussions to clarify a point, your protégé will appreciate your patience.

## Means to Communicate

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There are various ways in which you can communicate with your protégé. These include:

- 1 Email
- 2 Google Chat
- 3 Telephone
- 4 Audio or video conversations using Google
- 5 WebEx
- 6 Meeting in person when co-located

When in-person interaction is not possible due to distance and time, we strongly encourage you to use the rich online communication and other means of communication afforded you.

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## Set Your Goals and Summarize Completed Sessions

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It is important to set concrete goals with your mentee.

We encourage protégés to take charge of setting pace and direction, and to explore with you how you can help them attain goals. One way you can help is by holding your protégé accountable for developing and recording goals. After each meeting, you and your protégé should record a summary in order to form new action items and goals.

If your protégé has difficulty expressing goals, you can help by asking the following questions:

- **What are your goals for this mentoring relationship?** (e.g., competency development, career advancement, leadership skills development, gain knowledge in a particular topic area, etc.)
- **How will you know if you reached these goals?** (e.g., improved performance, promoted, attained a new credential, etc.)
- **What challenges can you anticipate?** (e.g., availability of advancement opportunities, need to further your formal education, length of time needed to develop a new skill or competency)

Additionally, take a moment to reflect on your own personal goals. Beyond the rewards of helping to shape another's growth, is there anything *you* wish to develop? Do you want to become a better mentor, communicator, listener, or leader? Are you seeking greater self-awareness and fresh perspectives? You will get more out of mentoring if you keep your goals in mind from the start.

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## Ideal Traits for Mentors

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Several traits will help you to be an effective mentor:

- **Inspire**—Mentors are more effective when they inspire their protégés. By setting an example, you may be able to motivate your protégé towards future paths that are beyond his or her original dreams. Challenge your protégé to find importance in what he or she aspires to do. Help your protégé create a future vision.
- **Be an active listener**—A sign of good listening is that your protégé feels he or she has been clearly heard and understood. Your protégé feels accepted and more willing to place trust in the mentoring relationship. To demonstrate active listening, show interest in things your protégé has mentioned in the past.
- **Share similar experiences**—Mentors are not expected to be superheroes. Most of the time, they are people who have already been through what their protégé's now face. Help your protégé feel empowered to embrace challenges by sharing your experiences.
- **Provide corrective feedback in an encouraging manner**—It is not easy to take feedback well. However, hearing it in a motivating and encouraging tone can help your protégé accept and apply feedback readily.

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- **Speak of your protégé in positive or neutral ways**—Your protégé needs to trust that your discussions are confidential and that the mentoring relationship is mutually supportive. When speaking of your protégé to others, provide only positive or neutral comments.

## Effective Online Communication

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Communication is a two-way process that includes just about any type of interaction with another person, from subtle to overt. Poor communication can leave us feeling angry or worried.

In person or on the phone, you can use voice modulation, facial expressions, and hand gestures to convey meaning. Because those cues are absent in writing, written communication is a skill and an art. The better people can express themselves, the more the relationship will deepen.

When communicating through writing, the following tips will help prevent miscommunication.

- **Meaningful subject line**—A good subject line ensures that the recipient recognizes the importance of your message and doesn't delete it accidentally. The subject line should also serve as a summary, conveying a clear idea of the topic you want to discuss.
- **Clear and concise messages**—Take the time to write clear, concise messages. Correspondingly, if you receive messages that are not clear and concise, take the time to get clarification. Do you clearly understand your protégé's points? If not, provide an opportunity to restate, elaborate or reconsider the intended message.
- **Investigating assumptions**—What assumptions may have been made, whether stated explicitly or not? To uncover assumptions and prevent misinterpretations, state your understanding of your protégé's message or ask for clarification.
- **Communicating about communication**—It is very important to inform your protégé of your schedule well in advance. This prevents the unnecessary frustration of a communication breakdown.

Online messaging has its challenges, but it also has advantages in many situations. Use every means possible to communicate with your protégé.

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## Ten Reminders for Effective Mentoring

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- 1 Demonstrate interest, helpful intent, and involvement. When you talk with your protégé, clear your mind of unnecessary thoughts so that you can offer your undivided attention.
- 2 Establish rapport by learning or remembering personal information about your protégé.
- 3 Begin by focusing on strengths and potentials rather than limitations.
- 4 Keep in frequent contact with your protégé. Even a short email or phone call can make a big difference.
- 5 Be available and keep your appointments.
- 6 Hold your protégé accountable for commitments and goals. Follow up frequently.
- 7 Don't be critical of other colleagues to your protégé.
- 8 Consistently evaluate the effectiveness of your mentoring and adjust your style as needed.
- 9 Be yourself and allow your protégé to do the same.
- 10 Remember that active listening is one of the most important skills of a good mentor.

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## Networking Tips

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In your daily life, you probably network all the time simply by meeting, connecting, and keeping in touch with others. You know firsthand that quality relationships can enrich your life and empower you to achieve your goals. Your protégé likely also realizes that it's important to develop and maintain a strong network, and would appreciate hearing your personal approach. Some suggestions on how to help:

- Let your protégé know how networking has helped you advance your career, from landing a job or promotion to finding new clients.
- Share ideas about how to better communicate, making sure to build on your protégé's comfort level with networking. Examples include smiling, eye contact, active listening, body language, complimenting, and finding common interests over which to connect.
- Share your techniques for starting conversations, such as an opening line when meeting people or a list of get-to-know-you questions.
- Share your thoughts on unethical networking practices. For example, you can tell your protégé why it is never a good practice to contact long-forgotten connections only when you need something like a job referral.
- Finally, we hope you will be willing to share a few contacts that may help your protégé reach his or her goals.

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## Suggested Activities for Mentors and Protégés

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- Read a book/article together
- Meet in person or virtually your Mentor's colleagues and expand your network of contacts.
- Discuss a particular project with which you are involved

## Don't Lose Sight of Your Goals

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There might be times in your mentoring relationship when progress might stagnate and you need to re-energize. At such times, try the following:

- 1 Revisit the goals that you have set for your mentoring partnership and for yourself. Are you on course?
- 2 Could you have done something better? Enthusiasm can help you and your partner move forward.
- 3 Evaluate how long you will need to achieve your goals. Set a specific date—time-bounded goals are more likely to be realized. Strategize for success.

Your partnership will be more successful if you both regularly reaffirm goals and commitment.

## Help during Periods of Transition

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As the mentoring partnership nears completion, your protégé may wonder whether his or her takeaways will smooth the transition to future endeavors. There may be loose ends yet to tie and some fears about moving on.

It's important to discuss your protégé's transition to post-mentoring endeavors. You may be in a position to help your protégé better prepare for what lies ahead and thus reduce any anxiety about the changes that await around the corner. Your advice could help your protégé realize his or her full potential.

Nothing can replace experience!

## Need for a Good Closure

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When mentoring partnerships end, some do so with goals accomplished. Some do not, for a number of reasons. Yet even less productive mentoring relationships can benefit from good closure. A successful exit strategy includes five steps:

- 1 **Processing conclusions**—Process the learning that took place because of the relationship while working towards goals. (Final Thoughts Worksheet)
- 2 **Integrating what was learned**—Discuss how to apply the learning and take it to the next level.
- 3 **Celebrating success**—Attend the end of the partnership virtual celebration.
- 4 **Redefining the relationship**—Talk about how the relationship is to continue, and what it will look like: will you transition from a professional mentoring relationship to that of colleagues or friends? Will the relationship cease entirely?
- 5 **Moving on**—Both partners let go and identify ways of keeping in touch, if appropriate and mutually desired.

## Provide Regular Feedback

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It is important to provide regular feedback on your mentoring experience and your mentoring relationship to the Program Manager and your Supervisor. Please complete any survey(s) you receive. Your feedback will help your Program Manager learn how to serve you better. Your protégé needs your constructive feedback too—and your tactful guidance may even improve the quality of the relationship.