

Mentoring Program



Maximizing the Mentoring Experience

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When people discuss mentoring, we think of an experienced and trusted adviser in a company or institution who trains and counsels new employees or students. Whether mentoring takes place at or outside of work or school, it is invaluable and will provide many benefits to both the mentor and mentee. Individual careers, businesses, our clients and the entire geoscience industry will all profit by sharing our expertise and experiences. I was fortunate to have several excellent mentors throughout my career, and I continue to learn and grow with them. As a mentor, I always learn more about myself and our industry with every mentoring experience. I get immense personal satisfaction from being a mentor myself and sharing my knowledge- one of many reasons I was excited for the opportunity to join the APGO Pilot Mentoring Program.

The Pilot Program mentors were instrumental in moving the mentoring program beyond the pilot phase. They remain strongly committed to the program and have taken on new mentees. As well, new mentors have recently joined the program.

The APGO Pilot Mentoring Program was supported by the hard work and dedication of APGO staff. Twelve initial pairs of volunteer mentors and mentees started the program in spring 2015. Feedback from participating mentees indicated a high degree of engagement and satisfaction.

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As part of the efforts to promote the Mentoring Program, I was asked by APGO to write an article about mentoring with a specific focus on how mentees can maximize their mentoring experience. I enlisted the assistance of a few of my mentees, including APGO mentees, trainees/students, and past employees to better understand the mentee's perspective. There was a common set of themes from the mentees and I have summarized these central concepts in this article. Thanks to all mentees and colleagues who provided their valuable input.

Understanding Goals and Objectives

In order for the mentoring relationship to be successful, the mentee has to first determine their objectives and goals. These could include professional insight on career paths or education; technical guidance; or specific items such as improving communication skills, dealing with workplace culture, or achieving that elusive work/life balance. Regardless of the mentee's goals, they should be clear, achievable, and have set milestones. Both parties should participate in developing, assessing and ultimately meeting the objectives.

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Finding the Right Match

It is important from the start to define exactly what the mentee is looking for (i.e. do they need a technical mentor, a business development mentor, a combination, or something different). In most cases, the mentee needs someone in their industry they can talk to, to help the mentee expand their knowledge and expertise, and ultimately come to their own decisions. It can sometimes be difficult to get this support and guidance in the workplace. The mentee may feel uncomfortable approaching their manager for assistance as they don't want to appear incompetent or lacking in knowledge. In other cases management may lack sufficient time, resources or motivation to commit to proper training and mentoring. Your boss may not always be the best person to seek career advice from as they could have their own corporate agenda regarding your path to career advancement. Finding the right fit between mentee and mentor is vital to achieving a successful, long-lasting relationship.

Real World Research

Like any good relationship, a mutually beneficial mentoring experience requires dedication, patience, and a willingness to listen and learn on both sides. One proven approach involves the mentee researching their vision(s) for the future and determining their specific requirements to get there. This could include information such as:

- What does the future role involve?**
- What do I need to get there?**
- What types of education and specific courses do I need?**
- What are the requirements to get an entry level positon - and to eventually get that 'dream job'?**
- What does the average work-day really look like?**
- Will I fit into that position?**
- What types of soft skills do I need to learn?**
- What is the anticipated income for the first 5 years?**

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The mentee should discuss their findings with their mentor, starting with who they believe they are now and who they want to be in the future (adventurer, calm, assertive, leader/boss, etc.) and talk through each associated career vision (environmental consultant, government scientist, resource development, etc.). Upon completing the research and discussions, the mentee should have a realistic understanding of what schooling they require, the cost of the schooling, what the job entails, the anticipated salary range, and so on. These items should be re-assessed periodically as career goals and requirements can change over time and with exposure to different areas of knowledge and expertise.

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Self-Reflection and Self-Assessment

In many cases, school, friends, and family may not provide realistic answers to the questions noted above, especially when it involves money and what their dream job will mean for their anticipated lifestyle. This gap between expectations and reality can lead to disenchantment, frustration and people not ending up where they want to be. Since these issues are seldom discussed realistically with students and young professionals, many potential mentees do not understand what the real world can entail. It can be intimidating and any perceptions of entitlement (e.g. I spent a lot of time and money getting this degree so I deserve more from my employer) can be quickly wiped out by the responsibilities and stresses of the working world (long hours, sitting at a desk, health, costs of goods, relationships amongst colleagues, lack of advancement, etc.).

The mentor should help the mentee understand who they currently are, and vision(s) of who they would like to become through self-reflection and self-assessment. These techniques include a series of questions to self-reflect. The mentor's guidance will come later after the mentee's self-reflection and may be in the form of more questions rather than opinions. This list of questions includes both personal and work related topics as they strongly correlate. Some mentors take the approach of talking a lot to the mentee, but what they should consider doing is listening and asking questions rather than doing all the 'imprinting'. Once the mentee's core vision(s) for the future have been refined, the mentor can provide more directed information and relevant knowledge, which will prove more valuable for the mentee's evaluation and decision-making process. I find the mentees often know the answer to what they want and need to do. They just need some encouragement, reassurance and a little direction to focus and reinforce their decisions.

Making the Most of the Experience

Both parties should have a desire to learn and raise the bar for their industry and/or professional association (in terms of expertise, ethics, public education, knowledge, leadership). In my experience, most potential mentors already hold these values and ideals (which is usually why they become a mentor) but it is important the mentee also shares this mindset. If not, it is essential for the mentor to impart these values to the mentee.

Most mentors have a busier work schedule than their mentees, and some volunteer their time to several mentees or organizations. It is important to establish and maintain a schedule. Scheduling conflicts and unplanned events happen to everyone, but it is only common courtesy and respect to try to minimize such conflicts, and to provide reasonable notice when changes are necessary. Yes, there is a time commitment and there can be financial implications for business, but the mutual benefits far outweigh any costs.

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The return on time invested can be maximized by preparing topics to discuss in advance of the scheduled meetings and reflecting on discussions afterwards. The mentee is then able to do further focused research, and derive their own informed decision. The method, frequency and duration of scheduled mentoring discussions should be mutually agreeable and comfortable. For some a phone call every few months or at set milestones is sufficient. For others, a more frequent or in-person meetings are preferable. Open, honest, two-way dialogue and positive constructive feedback are vital. The old adage “you get out what you put in” stands true, and proper pairing of mentor and mentee is important. Ultimately, you also need to have fun and make it enjoyable for both parties.

Speaking as a mentor, I am always thrilled to hear about a mentee’s accomplishments. Mentees may want to inform their mentors of educational and professional successes including any publications, industry recognition, awards etc. Although it is not the reason I personally became a mentor, receiving acknowledgement from the mentee when I have been able to help is always appreciated. It is amazing how much a simple and heart-felt thank-you can really brighten your day. To me, the ultimate compliment is to see mentees find success and happiness in their chosen field, and go on to become mentors themselves.

The APGO Mentoring Program facilitates shared and active learning among participants and helps foster a strong future for the profession.

Moving Forward

APGO is committed to growing the program while still maintaining long term sustainability. Currently, the self-directed model provides flexibility. It is not overly prescriptive as the mentoring agreement is developed by both the mentor and mentee. The program is designed to be as simple as possible while ensuring participants understand the code of conduct and confidentiality agreements. The APGO Mentoring Program facilitates shared and active learning among participants and helps foster a strong future for the profession. *“In the course of nurturing young professionals, they are also the most likely to become mentors. Thus we can say that mentoring is a gift that keeps on giving.”*, quotes Marilen Miguel, facilitator of the Mentoring Program.

I believe this is especially true for experienced professionals who have the opportunity and obligation to pay it forward to a new generation of geoscience practitioners. Our product is knowledge. Investments in training and mentoring serve to strengthen our product, clients, and the environment. Phil Collins, of the band Genesis, summarized it well by saying *“In learning you will teach and in teaching you will learn”*. I encourage everyone to find the time to listen, to learn, and to teach. We all will be greatly enriched.

For further information about the APGO Mentoring Program or to participate as a mentor or a mentee, please contact Marilen Miguel, APGO’s Coordinator of Member Services and Stakeholder Relations at mmiguel@apgo.net.