



# 2023 AAHA Mentoring Guidelines

## *Executive Summary*

*These guidelines were prepared by a task force of experts convened by the American Animal Hospital Association. This document is intended as a guideline only, not an AAHA standard of care. These guidelines and recommendations should not be construed as dictating an exclusive protocol, course of treatment, or procedure. This resource is not a substitute for legal or other appropriate professional advice.*

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**Please note this executive summary does not duplicate the guidelines; rather, it gives an overview of the content. There is no substitute for reading the guidelines in their entirety.**

AAHA recognizes how vital mentorship is for veterinary professionals and all practice team members, regardless of their current role, training, and/or experience. The value of mentoring increases during career transitions such as for new hires, those recently promoted or changing roles, and others implementing new protocols or programs. Effective mentoring relationships give veterinary professionals the tools and perspectives to thrive, grow, and persevere in their workplaces and professional journeys.

These guidelines provide a practical, action-oriented roadmap organized as follows:

- Definition of mentorship, including models and delivery options.
- Why veterinary medicine requires mentoring now more than ever.
- Benefits for mentors and mentees.
- Roles, responsibilities, and reasonable expectations for mentors and mentees.
- Key elements for successful mentoring relationships.
- Plan for creating and implementing mentorship programs, including strategies for healthy mentoring relationships.
- Next steps in creating and evaluating a mentoring program or relationship.
- Glossary and case studies.

By creating a culture of support, mentorship can improve the profession’s overall mental health and wellbeing. Mentoring relationships that create an inclusive environment can encourage diversity and representation. Positive mentoring experiences are crucial to recruitment and retention.

## What is Mentorship?

According to these guidelines, mentorship is “a two-way relationship and type of human development in which one individual invests personal knowledge, energy, and time in order to help another individual grow and develop and improve to become the best and most successful they can be.”

Mentorship is not coaching, advising, training, or sponsorship. Although mentors often leverage strategies used by coaches and advisors, each role functions differently. Table 1.1 clarifies the distinctions among various forms of professional development.

There are several mentorship models:

- **One-on-one mentorship** is the most common model, in which one individual supports, guides, and teaches another. The mentor typically has more professional experience than the mentee, but peer mentorship (pairing individuals with the same level of experience who are experiencing similar situations) is also effective.
- **Critical mentorship** is sensitive to the broader context of a person’s social identities related to race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Critical mentoring considers the identities of the mentee and mentor in program design, structure, and relationships. Rather than requiring mentors and mentees to share social identities, critical mentorship requires awareness and acknowledgement that social identities impact how a mentee learns as well as how they interact with their mentor, the profession, and society. This model assesses community needs, such as increasing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in the profession. Finally, critical mentorship engages the mentor and mentee in processes that foster self-reflection and personal and professional growth.



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Other models include apprenticeship, multiple, team, reverse, and group mentorship. These are briefly discussed in the guidelines.

Mentoring may be delivered in many ways: local or distance, experienced colleague or peer, formal or informal, and long term or short term. Multiple delivery methods allow one to tailor the experience to mentee and mentor needs. Technology and other tools offer ways to connect without always meeting in person or by supplementing face-to-face connections.

## Why Mentoring Matters

Since AAHA published the 2008 Mentoring Guidelines, societal changes, a global pandemic, social unrest, mental health challenges, and rising student debt have impacted the veterinary profession. The guidelines discuss how mentoring can help marshal diverse voices to address these and other pressing issues, such as stress, suicide, and burnout; discrimination and lack of inclusion; pay, retention, and career advancement; and gaps in career preparation. Areas emphasized include promoting mental health and wellbeing; addressing issues affecting Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and other

marginalized groups; increasing representation through DEIB; promoting mental health and wellbeing; and building the business case for mentorship.

Mentorship not only helps the individual through their career but also provides clear benefits to the workplace by promoting retention and job satisfaction.

## Benefits of Mentorship

Embracing the idea that all veterinary team members can learn from each other is essential to mentorship. Mentees may benefit from clinical skills and communication techniques, financial gains, and emotional support. Mentors may experience intellectual stimulation and stay abreast of advancements in veterinary medicine. Practices with mentorship programs are well-positioned to attract and retain high-quality employees. Increased career satisfaction, productivity, exposure to diversity, and networking and professional growth opportunities are some benefits shared by mentee, mentor, and the whole practice team. Figure 3.1 illustrates the benefits of mentorship.

## Roles, Responsibilities, and Expectations

Clarity about each participant's role and purpose supports better mentor/mentee matches and, ideally, better outcomes for both participants. The mentor is an individual with sufficient knowledge, skills, and/or resources to provide support and to facilitate growth for their mentee's professional development toward career goals. The mentee's role is to seek growth, driving a positive learning relationship with their mentor.

Mutual responsibilities of mentors and mentees include the following: foster trust and respect; maintain confidentiality; cultivate open, two-way communications and encourage radical candor; celebrate successes and cultivate gratitude; be open and receptive to feedback; develop a mentoring action plan; periodically evaluate the mentoring relationship; and expand your DEIB knowledge. Table 4.1 provides a five-step feedback model.

It is important to acknowledge the value of different cultures, learning styles, communication styles, personality types, and conflict resolution styles.

## Increasing Representation: The Intersection of Mentorship and DEIB

The 2020 WakeUp Vetmed campaign, led by the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association (MCVMA) along with nine other affinity organizations, highlighted issues affecting BIPOC communities within veterinary medicine. Additional awareness and training help prepare mentors to better understand the barriers faced by BIPOC individuals and other marginalized groups in the profession. Such barriers include:

- Lack of representation
- Less access to mentorship
- Socioeconomic factors
- Lack of training around business partnership and ownership
- Cultural and language barriers
- Diverse abilities and living with disability

Individuals may belong to more than one marginalized group and face intersectional barriers that require tailoring mentorship methods and programs to meet their individual needs. For that reason, required DEIB training, including key insights into belonging and cultural humility, supports continued mentor and mentee growth. Mentors must recognize that they may need to grow in their knowledge about their mentee's differing experiences and set their own goals for personal development, particularly with respect to DEIB.

It is important to acknowledge that the needs of one underrepresented group do not represent the needs of all groups. Using inclusive mentoring platforms (see Resources for a list), as well as active outreach to affinity organizations such as the MCVMA, Black DVM Network, Latinx Veterinary Medical Association, and PrideVMC can help to improve the depth and breadth of mentorship. When recruiting mentors and trainees, ensure that inclusivity is part of the process. This will offer a more holistic review of candidates and can provide more diverse perspectives within your organization.



## Expand your DEIB Knowledge

Expanding your DEIB knowledge is one of the mutual responsibilities of mentors and mentees, discussed in Section 4 of the Guidelines.

Normalize honest and open conversations that acknowledge differences in lived experiences and access to resources. Realize that both the mentor and the mentee enter mentoring relationships and work environments as individuals with intersecting personal and professional lives that may influence how they see the world and interact in it.

Acknowledge the importance of DEIB in mentorship relationships. Homophily, defined as the tendency to seek out those similar to oneself, often leaves women and individuals from underrepresented and marginalized communities with limited access to mentors within their desired professional fields. Although most of us do not intend to alienate specific groups, acknowledging differences in identities and backgrounds helps minimize the impact of a lack of self-awareness of privilege and power on the other party.

Commit to seeking out resources and DEIB training to help expand the mentor and mentee's knowledge in DEIB and related issues before entering the mentoring relationship. Consider attending training together or discussing relevant resources. Ensure that DEIB training includes an implicit bias focus and aim to obtain this training. An understanding of both microaggressions and macroaggressions and their relationship to implicit bias is also important.

Research and understand the specific barriers and challenges faced by individuals from underrepresented and marginalized communities, particularly as they pertain to the veterinary profession. Also understand the impact of privilege and power dynamics in mentoring and access to veterinary medicine as a profession. Those with privilege do not face the same barriers as those without privilege when it comes to accessing the veterinary field and positions of authority within the field. Those that hold privilege and authority have power. How the dynamics of that power are used in relation to those without it can negatively or positively affect access for individuals from marginalized groups.

Together, mentors and mentees can find common ways to communicate while acknowledging and celebrating individual differences in learning and thinking. Radical candor is a form of feedback that is done in a kind, humble, and direct manner and focuses on helping the other person. Encouraging radical candor can help mentors and mentees communicate effectively.

Mentees must make sure potential mentors understand they are seeking a mentoring relationship, be proactive and intentional, communicate openly and clearly, define goals, and discuss concerns. Commit to these responsibilities before seeking a mentor on your own or getting involved in an existing mentorship program.

Mentors must create an environment conducive to positive mentoring, consider power dynamics, cultivate both collaboration and independence, support self-directed learning, model desired behaviors, and support a mentee's mental health and wellbeing. Consider training in suicide prevention and emotional support, including Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR) training (see Resources section). Table 4.2 lists warning signs of mental health conditions.

## Ingredients for a Successful Mentoring Relationship

The guidelines stress the need for defining boundaries, expectations, and goals. This reduces assumptions and increases the likelihood of successful outcomes. In addition, it is important to create a plan for re-evaluating the relationship on a specific timeline, upon completion of goals, or in an expedited way if the mentorship relationship falters—for example, when goals are not met or irreconcilable difficulties arise. Table 5.1 summarizes the elements of successful mentorship related to issues of time, trust, communication, and respect for all identities and barriers.

Two key ingredients for successful mentorship are conflict management and assurance of personal and physical safety. The guidelines offer conflict management techniques to consider when experiencing conflict within the mentoring relationship or when supporting someone who is navigating a conflict. To promote personal and physical safety, the guidelines describe strategies to build a

trusting relationship, establish regular wellness check-ins, encourage mentees to seek professional assistance if indicated, and ensure both participants' personal safety. If one party feels their physical safety is at risk, they should end the mentoring relationship immediately.

Mentorship involves two parties willing to commit to the relationship, define boundaries to ensure success, and seek continued learning for growth and development. As long as there are clear expectations of both mentor and mentee, these relationships can evolve through the ebb and flow of career and personal growth.

## Plan to Create and Implement Mentoring Programs

The heart of the guidelines is a detailed discussion of the principles and steps involved in creating a mentorship program.

The first step in developing a mentoring relationship is to know yourself. Reflect on your strengths, areas for improvement, desires, and needs for the relationship. Table 6.1 offers a checklist with questions to consider, including readiness to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of mentor and mentee. Consider how various factors may impact the mentoring relationship; these factors include your own and the prospective mentor/mentee's skills, professional and lived experiences, identities, and issues of oppression and privilege.

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The guidelines describe some methods for researching mentorship options, such as looking into existing programs, considering your existing relationships and networks, finding a workplace mentor, and learning about your potential mentor/mentee.



## Top 6 Things to Remember About Mentorship

- 1** Mentorship exists when one person aids the development of another using their personal knowledge, energy, and time. Mentoring relationships remain important, especially at career transitions, and take a variety of forms.
- 2** Mentorship addresses some of the challenges facing veterinary medicine by supporting mental health and wellbeing, increasing representation of underrepresented groups (BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, etc.), and providing financial benefits to veterinary workplaces.
- 3** Effective mentorship benefits everyone: mentees, mentors, individual practices, and the veterinary profession. These benefits include, but are not limited to, increased self-confidence, increased career satisfaction, building networks, increased productivity, improved retention, and more.
- 4** Mentoring relationships require trust, respect, and open communication. Mentees should be proactive and goal oriented. Mentors should focus on creating a positive environment and an effective mentorship experience.
- 5** Successful mentoring relationships define boundaries, set clear expectations, and establish psychological and physical safety.
- 6** Key steps to effective mentoring relationships include thoughtful mentor/mentee selection, access to mentors/mentees, evaluation and continued re-evaluation, and troubleshooting when the relationship is not working.

Once you have identified a mentor or mentee who seems to be a good match, simply ask the person to enter the mentoring relationship with you. The guidelines offer suggestions for making the ask, considering whether a proposed relationship is right for you, how to say no, and how to handle rejection.

It is important to prepare for every phase of the mentoring conversation (i.e., before, during, and after). Several tables offer some help in developing conversations. Table 6.1 offers an in-depth checklist to use in preparing for the first mentorship meeting, and Table 6.2 lists open-ended questions relevant to the first meeting. Table 6.3 provides open-ended questions to keep the mentorship conversation moving forward. Table 6.4 lists questions that reflect mentees' concerns or fears regarding time management, client relations, personal issues, team or hospital issues, and proficiency. These questions may be used as the basis for a discussion of goals.

In addition, the guidelines briefly discuss being prepared for mentoring meetings, considering the proper setting and location for meetings, being present during meetings, fulfilling commitments made during meetings, and showing gratitude.

In addition to safety and other concerns, it is important to evaluate whether the mentorship relationship continues to provide value. This can be done by assessing effectiveness and goals, clarifying agreements, considering key markers, and keeping track of commitments and progress.

It is especially important to set a date at which the mentor and mentee can evaluate the relationship and decide whether to end or continue it. The guidelines offer helpful suggestions for ending a mentoring relationship early. These include conflict management techniques, a five-step process for framing a direct and positive conversation about disengaging, and a final word of advice: Do not burn bridges.

Section 6 ends with some advice for creating and evaluating a mentoring program in your workplace. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Instead, learn

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from existing programs and consider outsourcing skills development. Consider your organization's commitment and capacity to support the program, make time for mentoring, and ensure that it actually occurs.

### **Summary and Next Steps**

Mentoring offers hope for creating a healthier, more diverse, and more inclusive veterinary community with greater opportunities for growth and advancement for team members in all roles.

These guidelines provide a starting point for creating or re-evaluating a mentoring relationship or program. Seek

and use many other existing resources to improve your individual mentoring relationships and uplift the entire profession. Mentorship training programs exist along with training in specific areas such as DEIB, implicit bias, mental health and wellbeing, and others. A list of resources can be found at [aaha.org/mentoring](http://aaha.org/mentoring).

The guidelines conclude with a glossary of key terms and three case studies that invite veterinary team members to consider how the mentorship guidelines might be implemented in real-world scenarios involving a new veterinary graduate, a practice owner, and a head veterinary technician.

### **Conclusion**

Effective mentorship is essential to ongoing improvement for veterinary professionals, the veterinary profession, and the dynamic communities we serve. As you look to implement these guidelines as a mentor or a mentee (or both!), remember that learning and continued growth drive effective relationships and successful veterinary professionals.





[aaha.org/mentoring](https://aaha.org/mentoring)