Mentoring Guide #4: Navigating Common Challenges

Nora Beck Tan, Illumina Executive Coaching*

This fourth and final Guide in the series focuses on a few challenges commonly faced by Advisers. The emphasis is on helping new Advisers anticipate and successfully navigate these challenges.

I. Introduction

The previous Guides in this series are sequential, moving from understanding your role as a mentor to preparing the foundation for a successful mentoring relationship to building skills for effective mentoring interactions. In this final guide, we focus on specific challenges that have emerged consistently in interviews with both new and seasoned Advisers of postdoctoral Associates. They may arise at any point in the relationship. Navigating these challenges is no simple matter. There is no single “right way” to address any of them, they manifest differently in different relationships, and each has aspects that will challenge you both as an individual and as a mentor.

We highlight four areas:

- Accepting your responsibilities as a leader
- Managing yourself while leading others
- Finding the balance for each mentee
- Working through postdoctoral career transitions

By raising your awareness of these areas and sharing a few suggestions on each, we aim to help you avoid common pitfalls and anticipate aspects of advising that may require extra attention.

II. Accepting Your Responsibilities as a Leader

One of the simplest ways to define a leader is as a person who has followers. To become an Adviser, someone must have elected to work with you and learn from you – to follow you. Accepting your leadership role and understanding its implications on your behavior is an important and sometimes challenging part of becoming an Adviser.

Leaders set direction. As an Adviser, you set the overarching direction and boundaries for your group’s research program. Doing this well requires an understanding of the context within which the research will be done, including how it furthers the objectives, mission, and vision of the broader organization and agency. You will need to help Associates put their research in context, learn to shape their ideas appropriately within this context, understand where the boundaries lie and why, and ensure that their work is appropriately integrated with and complimentary to the work of other groups within your organization. Staying informed on the work that is done more broadly in your

* Nora@illuminaexecutive.com, 443-707-5613, www.illuminaexecutive.com
agency and sharing the insight and perspective you develop as a result is an important part of this aspect of leadership.

Leaders are also influential. As an Adviser, your words and actions will carry disproportionate weight. It is important not to lose sight of this. You are a role model for the Associates you are advising. They will look to you to understand what is—and is not—appropriate, and they will often emulate your behavior. Leaders must strive to be balanced, fair, and professional when commenting on agency policies, peers, colleagues, and the actions of your management.

Similarly, what you say to colleagues and scientific peers will strongly influence their opinion of your mentee. Complimentary comments from you on the talent, productivity, and work ethic of an Associate can help them build a good reputation and create opportunities for them. Conversely, less-than-positive comments made in a moment of frustration can do lasting damage to the reputation of an early-career researcher. When you find yourself frustrated or in need of advice, be mindful of your leadership responsibilities in choosing whom to speak with and what you say, especially when speaking with those who might influence your mentee’s future opportunities.

It is not only a leader’s words that influence others. If you arrive for a meeting feeling frustrated, rushed, or agitated, you will set a negative tone for the interaction. Your mentee may even assume your negative feelings are directed at them, or a result of something they have done. Leaders should make every effort to bring a positive mindset to every interaction with their followers. When those inevitable bad days arise, be transparent about the causes of your emotional state. If you share that you are agitated due a daycare issue, for example, your mentee is not likely to blame themselves and may even be empathetic.

Don’t forget to consider diversity and inclusion as you develop your leadership skills. It’s important to foster a work environment within your group that is welcoming and inclusive. Associates will come to your laboratory with different cultural backgrounds, native languages, and religious practices. Learning to pronounce unfamiliar names correctly and making every effort to accommodate cultural or religious practices, including holidays, can help foster a welcoming environment. Associates will also come to your laboratory with various family responsibilities and these can change during the course of their tenure. Your understanding and flexibility can help create an environment in which your mentees are empowered to balance personal and professional obligations in a healthy way. Be aware of the potential for Associates from underrepresented groups to feel isolated. Supporting an Associate’s engagement in employee resource groups or offering to foster connections to others with similar backgrounds are examples of ways you might help an Associate feel welcome.

There are many, many excellent resources available that can help you better understand what a leader’s role requires, and a few are cited in the References and Notes section. Many new leaders and mentors find that increasing self-awareness—reflecting on their own preferences, strengths, and weaknesses—is a useful first step. It may be even more fruitful to ask people who know you well to share their honest perceptions of you and/or to supplement your reflections with self-assessment tools. With respect to diversity and inclusion, you might start by learning about unconscious bias, including the ways it can impact the advocacy practices so important to mentoring. Formal training
and the support of a trusted mentor or leadership coach can also be very beneficial in helping you
develop your leadership skills.

III. Managing Your Workload While Advising Others

One challenge commonly cited by new Advisers\(^2\) is sustaining their own productivity while mentoring
others. As an Adviser, you are responsible not only for the work you do personally but also for
supporting the work of your mentees. You may also have to manage a larger program that integrates
the work you do personally with the work done by your group.

One important aspect of navigating this challenge involves time management, though with a twist.
It’s not just about managing your own time\(^7\) but about doing so in a way that takes the needs of
others into account. Part of this is simply recognizing that helping others is now part of “your” work.
It requires a significant investment of your time and energy, which will typically reduce the amount
of independent work you can produce. It is also involves planning ahead, a lot of proactive
communication, and managing expectations.

Planning ahead is important because others are depending on you to get their work done. There will
inevitably be some “crunch times” in your schedule, for example, when an important deadline looms,
or you are about to leave for a vacation or a business trip. As an independent contributor, you may
have chosen to put other projects on hold or perhaps work long hours for a few weeks in advance of
a deadline. When others are depending on you, this approach is no longer realistic. Putting an
Associate “on hold” for an extended period of time is not fair to them. You’ll need to plan ahead
instead, spreading out your own work more evenly and/or warning your mentee when your time and
availability may be limited.

Sometimes you may need to depend on an advisee to meet your own deliverables. For example, you
might need a summary of their recent results for a program review. Asking an Associate respectfully
and well in advance when you need something from them empowers them to manage their own
time effectively and will help them help you. It will also help you to avoid crisis situations or
unpleasant surprises.

Frequent and proactive communication is crucial to navigating the ongoing challenge of managing
your own workload once you become an Adviser. Be clear and honest about when you can deliver
on requests others make of you. If an advisee knows that you will need two weeks to review and
approve a study protocol, for example, they can plan accordingly. Keep your calendar up to date,
too, and share it with your mentees so they can see when you have blocked off time for independent
work as well as any upcoming meetings or vacations. Encourage your advisees to do the same,
indicating times when they will be unavailable—and when they might need additional support. For
example, a mentee may want extra time with you right before a conference paper submission
deadline or an important presentation.

IV. Finding the Balance for Each Individual
One of the most common challenges for new Advisers is to figure out the right level of support for each mentee. The amount of support wanted and needed will differ by individual, and even one person’s requirements will vary by topic and over the course of your relationship. There is no “one right answer” to the question of how to best support a mentee. All you can do is try to learn what works best for each individual—and then accept that this will likely change as your mentee matures.

The challenges Advisers face in finding the balance often involve finding the right level of engagement with a particular mentee and/or finding the right level of guidance on research direction to provide. First, let’s consider the level of engagement with your mentee.

**Level of Engagement: From Micromanagement-through-Abandonment**

What’s the widest possible “level of engagement spectrum?” At one end would be micromanagement: engaging with your advisee too frequently, too prescriptively, and too tactically, which will inhibit the Associate’s ability to learn and grow. At the other extreme is abandonment, when you engage with an advisee only infrequently and superficially. You leave them to struggle with obstacles on their own and deny them the opportunity to benefit from your wisdom and guidance. Somewhere in between the two extremes is an appropriate level of engagement for any individual.

In general, it’s better to start off by engaging too frequently and then adjust the interval accordingly as the Associate progresses. For example, you might connect daily or a few times a week for the first month, then weekly or even twice a month for the next six months. Ask each mentee how often they prefer to meet; some may be comfortable moving to monthly meetings right away, while others may want to maintain regular weekly interactions indefinitely. Trust your own instincts as well. If you feel disconnected or suspect that an Associate is spending too much time “spinning their wheels” or chasing unproductive tangents, suggest connecting more frequently. Conversely, if your meetings begin to feel redundant or you spend most of your time simply congratulating your mentee on yet another well-reasoned plan, you can suggest less frequent interactions. Thoughtful questioning strategies can help you understand how well things are going, too. For example, you might ask “What is clear, and what shall we spend more time on?” rather than “Is everything clear?” Or “How often should we be meeting?” rather than “Meeting once a month feels right, doesn’t it?” In general, use open questions that encourage the Associate to express their needs more fully.

Associates will come to your group with different levels of confidence and competence in different areas. One Associate might be very confident and competent when designing experiments, moderately competent when communicating scientific work, and completely lacking in confidence when working through administrative processes within your organization. Resist the temptation to use a single approach when mentoring your advisees as they learn different skills in different areas.

If you are struggling to find the right balance in your interactions, you may find the principles of Situational Leadership to be useful. When people learn any given skill, they move through several stages as they build the competence and commitment needed to become independent practitioners. As a mentor, you can adjust your style of engagement as your mentee learns, altering the balance of direction and encouragement you offer. As competence builds, the direction you offer can become
less tactical and prescriptive and more collaborative or challenge-oriented. To help your mentee persist in mastering a difficult skill, offer support and encouragement in areas where their confidence is low or shaky—again becoming less engaged as self-assurance grows.

Next, let’s look at another important aspect of finding the right balance for each individual.

**Directional Guidance: Balancing Exploration and Productivity**

As a research mentor, you want to encourage exploration—but also foster productivity, which generally requires focus. Like levels of engagement, this can be thought of as a spectrum. We mentioned in Mentoring Guide #1 that the postdoctoral experience is often the first time an Associate gets a true taste of intellectual freedom. Identifying and exploring unexpected connections, new phenomena, and tangential research directions (whether independently or collaboratively) are all important parts of creative scientific endeavor, often the genesis of novel research ideas, and can greatly benefit an Associate’s professional development. Research productivity is also critical to career success—and inherently a challenge, given the Associate’s brief tenure. Since exploration and focus are both so important, part of your role as an Adviser is to help your mentees find a balance between these two extremes. It may be tempting to try to maximize productivity, but that should not be the only goal.

As with most aspects of mentoring, there is no simple formula to be applied here. Encouraging exploration while simultaneously holding advisees accountable for their progress can be thought of as a tension to sustain, rather than as a problem to solve. Some experienced Advisers have developed their own guidelines to help new Associates maintain a sufficient level of focus. One advises Associates to sustain at least 80% of their effort on their primary project continuously, while another suggests focusing exclusively on the primary project for at least six months. A third encourages mentees to add a single secondary project and then coaches them in choosing one that’s worth pursuing. Of course, all of these guidelines must be applied within the context of good judgment. If an Associate you are advising struggles with focus, encouraging a second project may not be in their best interest. Conversely, an Associate with strong self-discipline may be able to manage the balance perfectly well on their own. The uncertainty inherent in all research endeavors is also a factor. If a hypothesis underpinning a mentee’s primary research project is disproven early on, or critical resources become unexpectedly unavailable, exploration may become a mentee’s primary focus temporarily.

No matter the circumstances, it is always important to monitor and sustain progress. We covered some of the best practices in earlier Guides: helping Associates develop a realistic picture of success at the outset of their research program, setting goals and staying focused on them, and keeping career advancement and interview timelines in sight. This brings us to our final topic.

**V. Working Through the Career Transition**

Helping Associates launch their career is a very important part of your role as an Adviser. Navigating the transition as an Associate moves on from your group may be very challenging for both of you, in
particular because much of what happens is impossible to schedule and beyond your control. It can be difficult from a planning, time management, and self-management perspective.

As discussed in Mentoring Guide #1, there are many ways Advisers can help their mentees as they search for their next position. You can help an Associate identify personal strengths and interests, raise their awareness of potential career paths, expand their professional network, and target their research program to a preferred career path. Helping an advisee actually find and transition to a suitable position is the final step.

Encourage your advisees to start seeking employment well ahead of the expected end of their tenure. Exactly how far ahead varies by academic discipline and the status of the job market, but 6-12 months ahead is frequently cited by experienced Advisers. It’s also important to communicate your understanding that finding their next position will take some time away from their research. That will help alleviate any concerns your mentee might have about prioritizing their job search and simultaneously make things a bit more difficult for you. If a great opportunity for your mentee comes along earlier than expected, the total output of your work together will very likely be reduced. Likewise, you may be personally disappointed if a particularly interesting or enjoyable collaboration is cut short. It can also be painful to see a mentee turn down a position that you believe to be a great opportunity for them (or accept one that you think is not). Accepting these conditions is part of being an Adviser and managing any anxiety it triggers for you may require extra attention to self-management.

There are a few practical things you can do to prepare yourself for an Associate’s transition. One is recognizing the time you will need to invest in formal recommendations. Typically, this means writing letters of reference; it may also involve direct consultation and/or filling out custom questionnaires. It takes time to draft the core of a thoughtful, fair, complimentary, and articulate letter that points out the strengths, accomplishments, praise-worthy traits, and successes of your mentee. It takes additional time to understand each individual position your mentee is applying for, then customize your letter to emphasize especially relevant accomplishments or traits. You can also add your thoughts on why your mentee is a good fit for this specific position and why they have the potential to succeed. You may need to write many such letters, especially if the targeted job market is particularly competitive (e.g., faculty positions) or if your mentee has a restricted search window (e.g., a limited geographic area). Doing this conscientiously is part of an Adviser’s role.

Another practical approach to navigating this challenge is to engage proactively with your advisee to develop a transition strategy. This can help make the transition as smooth, amicable, and mutually beneficial as possible. If your mentee decides to leave early for a great opportunity, work together to prioritize the work to be completed before they go. If the Associate is agreeable, you might even discuss options to help with wrap up, such as slightly delaying their start date or asking for permission to spend some time on loose ends at the new job (e.g., finishing a paper). Receptivity to some wrap-up time is not uncommon, particularly if the Associate is leaving early to accommodate the new employer’s wishes and the amount of wrap-up time requested is time-bound and reasonable.
If your mentee is leaving for another research position, you may also wish to discuss the possibility of future collaboration. When considering this, be mindful of the need for your mentee to make an independent name for themselves. Be careful not to inadvertently foster an unhealthy level of dependence or interfere with your mentee’s pursuit of new directions.

It’s also helpful for Advisers to understand the options that are available for an advisee facing a gap in employment after their NRC program. Assuming the Associate is productive and engaged in relevant, funded research, extending their appointment through the NRC or other agency programs may be a possibility. They may also be eligible for short-term positions at affiliated institutions or within a collaborator’s group. Since these opportunities are usually agency- and discipline-specific, other experienced Advisers within your organization or scientific community may be the best source of information, ideas, and advice.

VI. A Note on Navigating Extraordinary Challenges

No matter how qualified and experienced you become as an Adviser, you may eventually run into a situation that mentoring cannot resolve. Harassment and incivility sometimes occur in even the best of workplaces. Stress, burnout, and mental health issues are of concern in graduate student and postdoctoral researcher populations. One Associate may arrive at your laboratory after a challenging graduate school experience; another might feel very isolated after moving alone to a new location and losing their local support system. Either may need help that you are not able to provide personally. Navigating these situations as an Adviser requires accepting that they are beyond your capabilities and often reaching out for help. Many agencies have internal groups to assist employees who are being treated unfairly, experiencing mental health challenges, or require other types of assistance. If you find yourself in circumstances where the support needed by an Associate goes beyond what you can offer, you might consult confidentially with a trusted supervisor, administrator, or human resources professional. If appropriate, you may seek out resources available within your agency and help your mentee access them.

VII. Summary

In this Mentoring Guide, we focused on understanding and navigating challenges that are commonly encountered by Advisers. We discussed the Adviser’s role as a leader, the associated responsibilities of setting direction with context and exercising your influence carefully, and mindfully and cited a few resources that will help you further develop your leadership skills. The challenge in managing your own time and productivity once you become an Adviser was also highlighted, and we shared tips like recalibrating your expectations, planning ahead, communicating proactively, and setting boundaries.

We also explored the common challenge of finding the right balance of support for each individual. We discussed striking a balance between a focus on productivity and a mentee’s freedom to explore, suggesting techniques that help create accountability and approaches borrowed from experienced NRC Advisers. We then touched on adapting your level of engagement to meet a mentee’s needs and adjusting it to account for growth.
Finally, we addressed navigating the career transition of an Associate. We revisited the Adviser’s role in helping an Associate prepare for their next step and discussed specific transition issues. Tips shared included: anticipating the time spent on formal recommendations, accepting inherent uncertainty, understanding what options may exist to cover an employment gap, and partnering with your mentee to create a mutually beneficial transition strategy.

For a deeper dive into mentoring core skills, techniques, or perspectives, please see the companion document NRC Mentoring Guides: Resources for Self-Study.

Comments and feedback are welcome and may be sent to Nora Beck Tan via email at nora@illuminaexecutive.com.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

1 Note: Throughout this document, the terms “postdoctoral researcher,” “NRC Associate,” “Research Associate,” “Advisee,” and “Mentee” will be used interchangeably to refer to the NRC Postdoctoral Research Associates. The terms “NRC Adviser,” “Adviser,” and “Mentor” will be used interchangeably to refer to advisers of NRC Postdoctoral Research Associates, who are also expected to be mentors to these individuals.

2 Nora Beck Tan - unpublished research, perspectives of NRC Postdoctoral Advisers

3 There are many, many excellent resources on developing leadership skills. In addition to exploring some of the materials cited here, you may want to search on your own, ask your mentors for suggestions, and check with the Learning & Development organization in your agency for opportunities and advice.

  NOTE: Start with the Guide entitled Identify what makes a great manager.

You may want to check with your agency’s Learning & Development office to see if these or similar self-assessment tools are available at no cost to employees.

- 16 Personalities. (n.d.). It’s so incredible to be understood. https://www.16personalities.com

There are many, many excellent resources on implicit/unconscious bias. In addition to exploring some of the brief materials cited here, you may want to search on your own, ask your colleagues for suggestions, or look within in your agency for more.

- TEDx. (2017, September 18). We all have implicit biases. So what can we do about it? | Dushaw Hockett | TEDxMidAtlanticSalon. [Video] YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKHSJHkPeLY

The following articles address the topic of avoiding bias when recommending or advocating for a mentee.

7 These references may be of interest if you are challenged in managing your own personal time beyond any particular issues related to advising:


11 Private communications with experienced NRC Advisers.

12 Mentoring Guides for NRC Advisers – Mentoring Guide #2: Building the Foundation for a Successful Advising Relationship. See in particular: Section IV, Appendix B, Appendix D, and Figure 10. https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/pgasite/documents/webpage/pga_365028.pdf


14 Your agency’s NRC Laboratory Program Representative may be able to help you understand your agency’s policies and explore options.

15 The following resources all concern stress and burnout in the context of postdoctoral research positions.