

Hear It From the Attendings: Mentorship in Retina

An honest, casual conversation about mentorship from those who lead.

INTERVIEWS WITH AUDINA M. BERROCAL, MD; ZELIA M. CORREA, MD, PHD; AND ADRIENNE W. SCOTT, MD

What qualities do you look for in a potential mentee?



Audina M. Berrocal, MD: The perfect mentee is the individual who is either early in their training or at a

crossroads in their career. The mentee needs to be open to guidance even when that guidance requires introspection or comes at a perceived personal cost. A great mentee needs to be ready to grow, which, at times, requires honesty and focus. For mentoring to impact your life, you must be willing to be mentored.



Zelia M. Correa, MD, PhD: I look for those with drive, goals, and talent, in that order. But none of those

features are worth investing in if the mentee is not respectable, trustworthy, humble, and open to advice and counseling. An individual with energy and drive aims to be prepared and competent and is, therefore, better equipped to overcome obstacles, stay on task, and work on their goals.

What makes a good mentor?



Adrienne W. Scott, MD: A good mentor is someone with whom you can build a relationship. Keep in

mind that a mentor is not necessarily a friend. It is usually someone who is senior to you, who has walked the path to success that you're trying to achieve. A mentor must be available and supportive, and it must be someone that the mentee feels comfortable going to when they are challenged. "I'm having trouble and struggling with this next step," is a sentence that a mentor must be willing to respond to by explaining how they navigated it.

Dr. Correa: A good mentor opens doors and opportunities for their mentee. A good mentor establishes a positive relationship, carefully listens before offering advice, and allows the mentee to make their own decisions.

Dr. Berrocal: A good mentor understands who you are, where you come from, and where you want to go. A

great mentor helps you to find your personal path. Mentorship requires self-knowledge, assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and comfort with one's career and life. Self-knowledge allows a mentor to learn a mentee's strengths and weaknesses and helps the mentee take the steps that allow them to grow.

How does one find a mentor?

Dr. Berrocal: I believe that we are surrounded by mentoring opportunities. The best mentoring occurs naturally and it is not forced. But if you are not open to mentoring, then you will not recognize those opportunities. Fixed mentoring, in which you are assigned a mentor, has a place in many organizations, but often doesn't have the depth of an organic mentoring relationship.

Dr. Correa: Finding a mentor can happen by chance, but it is more productive as an intentional action. The first step is to identify people you would like to mirror, then study their attitude, circle of influence, and professionalism. If there is still interest,

request a meeting to establish a rapport and discuss a mentoring relationship. Be sure that your potential mentor has the time to advise you. Finally, it is important to realize that anyone can have multiple mentors who may advise on different aspects of life, including professional, academic, and family mentors.

Have you seen differences in men and women mentees?

Dr. Berrocal: I think there are differences, but these are more based on personality, career goals, personal life, and ethnicity rather than gender. Nonetheless, I sometimes address some of the classic stereotypes to be the best mentor for each of my mentees.

Dr. Scott: I've not noticed differences between the genders of the mentees that I have or have had. I think it's very individual depending on how driven somebody is and how focused someone is. So I can't generalize a man mentee versus a woman mentee. I think it all comes from your own internal drive.

Do you tailor guidance for women differently than for men? If so, how?

Dr. Berrocal: I do not tailor guidance based on gender, but rather based on the individual. That said, as a woman I can help women mentees in the many aspects of becoming a better woman physician-surgeon. There are experiences, challenges, and hurdles for women that men will never experience. At the same time, I like to guide

my mentees and teach them how to recognize and understand the silent and hidden biases that exist for both men and women.

Dr. Scott: I wouldn't advise a man or a woman differently as mentees. I do think, however, that women in this space might have to work harder to prove themselves, as this is a field that has been traditionally male-dominated. I do think that as a woman, particularly as a woman from an underrepresented minority background, I have experienced a unique path.

In general, I do give the same advice to anyone I'm mentoring, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or professional achievement: The most important part of achieving any goal is to be a very hard worker and to stay focused on what it is you're trying to achieve.

What general advice do you offer to your mentees?

Dr. Correa: I don't mentor based on gender, but I do alert women to the challenges we face, especially regarding moving up the professional ladder. I make sure junior women around me get equal access to opportunities, and I always tell them that they don't need to fit any particular mold and that diversity is the secret ingredient to the most successful teams.

Dr. Berrocal: It is so important to understand that, if you don't find that *one* lifelong mentor, look for mentors that come into your life at important moments. I call these *situational mentors* or *temporary mentors*. They are very valuable. For many, it is ideal to have an ideal single mentor; for most that is impossible to find. Learn to be mentored by many different people for different moments and different parts of your life.

Dr. Correa: Every situation and experience should be an opportunity to learn, not only professionally but personally. Even when the experience is negative, it is an opportunity to figure out what not to do. An important part of our profession is to be in continual learning mode.

Dr. Scott: Work hard, particularly in training when you have a dedicated support system and an opportunity to learn everything about the field. Being a fellow, particularly in a field like retina, it's a unique opportunity to learn literally at the side of an expert. Work as hard as possible, learn as much as possible, ask as many questions as possible because when you're out of training you will not have the same opportunities to learn. Take advantage of every resource, including your attendings.

Of course, when you're in the real world, you can always go back to a mentor and ask him or her questions. But there's nothing like a full-time apprenticeship, which is what vitreo-retinal fellows have. ■

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