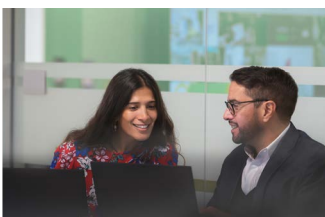# Real World Data Sciences Learner Mentor Program 2021

University and learner handbook

MERCK

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Program overview

Real World Data Scientists at Merck & Co., Inc. focus on scientific excellence and quality in effectiveness and value evidence research. Within Merck, they lead research to generate evidence to inform healthcare decisions, enabling patients better access to Merck's vaccines and medicines. A diverse and inclusive work culture is essential for building an equitable society and for supporting innovation and talent development. In alignment with Merck's larger diversity and inclusion efforts, the Real World Data Sciences Learner Mentor Program was developed to engage students in learning more about careers in health economics, outcomes research, epidemiology, data sciences related to real world sciences.

Receiving mentoring is an effective tool to accelerate one's development and success. Mentoring is largely about discovering new understandings, changing perspectives, and acquiring abilities from the life experiences of another. Mentoring can make people more aware of their strengths, dreams, goals, opportunities, next steps, and unexplored potential.

"Mentoring is a relation with a high potential for personal and professional development, where the goal is to support the growth of one or both parties" –Clawson

Objectives of the program

- Expose learners/students to careers in health economics, outcomes research, epidemiology, real world evidence, and data science
- Create opportunities for learners/students to meet and partner with others who hold various professional experiences
- Help learners/students identify and achieve career development and personal growth goals
- Equip learners/students with the tools necessary to perform to their highest capability

The mentor, learner/student, and university manager relationship

Mentoring is a shared accountability between the mentor, learner/student, and university manager. Each has a separate role but a united focus: assist the learners/students with reaching their goals.

- Mentors focus on transferring knowledge and assisting learners/students with developing new capabilities
- Learners/students focus on their goals and priorities and seek feedback to facilitate development
- University managers serve as the primary point of contact in maintaining the relationship and communication between learners/students and the Real World Data Scientists

Real World Data Sciences Learner Mentor Program options

There are several different ways that learners/students can benefit from the Learner Mentor Program depending on their development needs and available time resources.

Coffee hour
- This is a forum event that will be conducted regularly at prespecified dates/times.
Potential dates for 2021 - 2022 school year:
  - **September 24: 12 pm - 1 pm EDT**
  - **January 21: 12 pm - 1 pm EST**
  - **April 29: 12 pm - 1 pm EST**

- The sessions will start with brief presentations by cross-functional Real World Data Scientists (eg, epidemiologists, health economists, data scientists) and then will be followed with time for questions and answers. Topics of the presentations may include:
  - **Current job functional duties**
  - **Professional work history**
  - **Academic pathways**
  - **Lessons learned and suggestions**

- Coffee Hour is offered to students across all universities, thus sessions may include students from other universities and will be conducted via WebEx or MS Teams

1:1 mentoring/group mentoring
- Learners/students have the option to request direct, ongoing mentoring by a Real World Data Scientist, either in the format of 1:1 mentoring or in a small group mentoring format
  - **Mentoring groups will be limited to 3 learners/students**

- Timelines and objectives will be decided and planned between the mentor and the learner/student, based on the learner's/student's needs and goals

- As a general guidance, 1:1 or group mentoring will last 1 year with monthly meetings, scheduled at the direction of the mentor and learner/student

Real World Data Scientists as members of thesis or dissertation committees
- Learners/students may request from the university manager to have a Real World Data Scientist serve as a thesis or dissertation committee member, in alignment with all university guidelines

- The time commitment for this option is variable and depends on multiple factors including university procedures, scope, and content of the dissertation/thesis topic. Both the Real World Data Scientist and the learner/student need to set clear expectations before entering into this type of mentoring agreement

University manager responsibilities

University managers will serve as the liaison between the Real World Data Sciences Learner Mentor Program leads and the university learners/students. University managers will serve as the point of contact for students interested and involved in the Program. University managers should be prepared to reach out to students to monitor their participation in the mentor program, as needed, and/or answer questions that students may have. More specific details across each component of the program are provided below.

If the university has a specific program evaluation process for the overall mentor program or collaboration, it is the university manager's responsibility to oversee these assessments.

The primary method for contacting the Real World Data Sciences Learner Mentor Program leads is the following email address: **CORE_Mentorship@merck.com**.

Coffee hour:
- University managers will be asked to gauge students' interest for each of the scheduled coffee hours. One month and 2 weeks prior to the event, invites and reminders will be sent to university managers, who will then forward the invite to their interested students
- Based on feedback from interested students, university managers are encouraged to submit feedback and suggestions on topic areas of discussions and presentations for these public forums

1:1 mentoring, group mentoring, and committee member membership:
- **Prior to learners/students being matched with mentors and/or committee members:**
  - o University managers will be asked to gauge students' interest in the Program
  - o University managers are encouraged to share this handbook with all interested learners/students
  - o University managers will be asked to complete a bi-annual enrollment spreadsheet as the method for communicating to the Program leads what the students' needs and interests are. The enrollment spreadsheet will be sent to university managers in March/April and September/October
  - o Following completion of the enrollment spreadsheet, Program leads will work on matching learners/students with mentors. Program leads will send the university manager a spreadsheet that includes a list of the matches between learners/students and mentors.
  - o At this time, university managers will be expected to notify their learners/students that a match has been made and that a formal communication from the Real World Data Sciences Learner Mentor Program is forthcoming. It is requested that the university managers notify the program leads once this communication has been made

- **During the matching process:**
  - o Following confirmation that students have been notified by the university manager, the Program leads will send an introduction email to the learner/student and mentor. This email will have the university manager copied on it

  - o The introduction email will instruct the learner/student and mentor to schedule their first meeting. For any questions or concerns, learners/students are encouraged to contact the university manager and mentors are encouraged to contact the Program leads

- **After learners/students are matched:**
  - o Communication between learners/students and mentors, once matched, will not include the university manager or the Program leads

  - o If the university manager would like to assess the status of the mentoring relationship, they are encouraged to reach out to the learners/students directly

  - o If the university manager has questions or comments regarding the overall Program, they are encouraged to reach out to program leads

1:1 mentoring/group mentoring

Format of mentoring meetings
Mentoring meetings may take the form of 1:1 interactions or group meetings depending on the interest of learners/students and the availability of mentors.

Building a productive relationship
The 4 pillars
Every interaction presents an opportunity to either build or erode the mentoring relationship. A productive mentoring relationship is supported by four pillars: trust, confidentiality, communication, and courage.

Trust	
How to build	**Specific actions you can take**
Use plain-speaking, straight talk **Be open and honest** **Demonstrate respect in all interactions** **Practice accountability; do not blame others when something does not happen as discussed** **Be flexible and accessible**	- Be open to discussing the following at the onset of the relationship: - Personal and professional background - Thoughts about the mentoring - Confirm expectations/measures of success - Collaboratively develop the mentoring agreement - Use self-disclosure; share your personal thoughts: *I personally feel like…* *What I don't like…*

Confidentiality	
How to build	**Specific actions you can take**
Agree on boundaries and do not cross them **Clarify expectations about topics that should be reported** **Be open to sharing, even if not directly tied to your goals** **Demonstrate your belief in confidentiality by acting with integrity with all information that is confidential, regardless of the relationship**	- Demonstrate your understanding of what is confidential by clarifying what "is on and off the record" at the conclusion of mentoring sessions - Seek your mentor's approval to share information with others - Immediately share if confidentiality has been inadvertently broken - Clarify when a topic seems to be headed in a direction where confidentiality may not be able to be protected - During conversations, ask for permission before taking notes

Communication

How to build	Specific actions you can take
Be present and attentive to your mentor **Be timely with your questions, thoughts, and opinions** **Look for the unspoken message** **Provide thoughtful responses to your mentor's questions; avoid "yes/no" responses that close the door**	- Prepare for one-on-one meetings: - Identify 2 to 3 key discussion topics - Review agreements from prior meetings - Apply active listening skills: - Repeat back (paraphrase) what you heard - Ask follow-up questions - Share your point of view - Ask for clarification/confirmation

Courage

How to build	Specific actions you can take
Ask clarifying questions to understand mentor's advice, suggestions, etc. **Seek permission to provide feedback** **Provide specific, actionable feedback to your mentor around the relationship, your needs, etc.** 	- When faced with tough issues or challenges, ask yourself the following questions to ensure you face the situation with courage: - What could be a great outcome? - What results do I hope to achieve? - What is likely to happen if I do not address this issue? - What makes this a difficult issue for me to address? - Learn the STOP-START-CONTINUE framework as a way to share observations and facts with your mentor or others in a non-threatening manner: - STOP-START-CONTINUE Identify the area in which you want to provide feedback and then clearly state your thoughts: *I would like you to do less _____ because it _____.* *I would like you to do more _____ because it _____.* *I would like you to keep doing ____ because it ____.*

The role of a mentor

Each mentor-learner/student relationship is unique and requires the mentor to be flexible in their mentoring approach. The mentor will likely focus on 4 different roles: **process partner, capability developer, thought partner,** and **supporter**.

Process partner

- **Manages the mechanics of one-on-one meetings**
- **Ensures a mentoring agreement is created and agreed upon**
- **If necessary, modifies agreement to reflect changes in the relationship**
- **Collaborates with learner/student and agrees on action steps between meetings**
- **Holds the learner/student accountable for achieving agreed-upon action steps**

Capability developer

- **Assists learner/student with converting feedback into action**
- **Looks for 'developmental moments' and provides suggestions for the future**
- **Enables learner/student to discover 'remedies' to improve performance and continue development**

Thought partner

- **Serves as the learner's/student's sounding board**
- **Challenges learner/student to avoid old and unproductive mindsets**
- **Fosters increased self-awareness and uncovers blind spots**
- **Asks questions to discover options and potential solutions**
- **Shifts conversation from presenting issues to real/below the surface issues**
- **Shares new insights, experiences, and ideas with learner/student**

Supporter

- **Creates a safe and trusting relationship**
- **Assists learner/student with feeling comfortable in branching out and meeting others to expand their professional network**
- **Listens to learner/student and provides encouragement**

The role of a learner/student

Being a learner/student is a powerful opportunity to grow. Still, being a learner/student is a "job," just as it is for the mentor. In preparation for mentoring meetings, learners/students should identify 2 to 3 key topics of interest for discussion to make sure the meeting with their mentor is productive. Learners/students should also review discussion points from previous meetings and complete any outstanding action items. Keeping the 4 pillars that support a productive mentoring relationship in mind, learners/students should be open to feedback and feel comfortable providing appropriate feedback to their mentor concerning desired outcomes of the mentor program.

Tips for learners/students

Here are 6 key points that learners/students should keep in mind:

1. **It's your job, not theirs**
   The focus of mentoring is on you, the learner/student. Therefore, don't expect your mentor to do all the work. His or her role is to facilitate your development, not do it for you. Take the initiative and follow up on agreed-upon goals.

2. **Think commitment, not lip service**
   Regular, ongoing contact is one of the most important building blocks for successful mentoring. Agree with your mentor to meet on a regular and ongoing basis and avoid cancelling appointments.

3. **Give back and get more**
   Mentors don't usually ask how the learner/student has benefitted from the relationship.
   Take the time to share examples and to say "thank you" on occasion, and you'll often find that the mentor will give more without your having to ask. Sharing how a mentor has been helpful in the past gives the mentor guidance on how to be helpful in the future.

4. **Keep expectations realistic**
   Unstated assumptions or expectations can have a negative impact on a relationship. To avoid this, you and your mentor should both discuss your expectations of each other and the relationship. For example, discuss how often you'll meet or what areas you will work on. When there's a change in expectations, discuss this as well. Relationships grow and change and so do expectations, so those agreed upon early on may not be the same later. Have periodic conversations to discuss your mutual expectations.

5. **It's risky, but it's healthy**
   A mentoring relationship is not meant to make you comfortable with where you are. It should challenge you both professionally and personally. This can't happen unless you're willing to take risks. What kind of risks? Whatever makes sense, but things like discussing your lack of confidence, challenging a mentor on an issue, trying something completely outside your comfort zone are all examples. Taking risks is an integral part of growth and well-being. So by taking risks, you're actually getting healthier!

6. **The elephant will crush you**
   Don't sit with an issue that you should discuss with your mentor; otherwise, it may negatively impact your relationship. If something is not working in the relationship, chances are your mentor is feeling similarly, but neither one of you is taking the responsibility to deal with it. Here's an example: The relationship is not going well and you or your partner frequently cancels appointments. Instead of discussing the issue, you both avoid it. Your relationship is doomed and probably will be a waste of time. Talking about the elephant in the room will remove the elephant and give you the opportunity to reframe your relationship in a positive way.

The mentoring agreement

In the appendix of this handbook is a copy of the Mentoring Agreement Letter. The mentoring agreement helps to clarify the mentor's and learner's/student's goals and expectations for the relationship and defines the working relationship together. The purpose of completing a mentoring agreement is to benefit the mentoring relationship. Agreements will not be collected or reviewed by anyone outside of the mentor and learner/student relationship, but we recommend you complete the agreement letter between yourselves, using the guidance below to complete the sections.

1. Goals/objectives
Goals are determined by you through the identification of personal development needs or interests. Consider how you and your mentor might assess your progress in meeting your goals.

2. Building a productive mentoring relationship
Based on the 4 pillars (trust, confidentiality, communication, and courage) model, consider which concepts are most important to you in building a productive mentoring relationship. Both the mentor and learner/student should highlight these ideas in their mentoring agreement letter.

3. Scheduling
Scheduling is the section of the agreement in which you and your mentor decide how long you think the relationship will last as well as when and how frequently you will meet. The suggested frequency of meetings is monthly for a duration of 1 hour and continuing for a full year.
- How often will we meet?
- When and where?

Guidelines for completing the agreement

1. Review the mentoring agreement template prior to your first meeting with your mentor and ask that they do the same.

2. By the end of your first meeting, you should have discussed initial thoughts on the mentoring agreement.

3. The mentoring goals and building a productive mentorship relationship sections may require additional thinking beyond the first meeting. Each of you should take these sections as action items and plan to finalize the agreement during your second meeting.

4. Refer to and modify the agreement throughout the relationship, as necessary.

Setting goals/objectives

It will be important to set objectives during the initial stages of the mentoring relationship. Consider:

- Any development gaps
- How you could measure progress

Questions to establish initial goals/objectives

Write down one general area that you want to develop in or learn as a result of your mentoring relationship.

The following questions can be used by you and your mentor to clarify the general goal statements of the agreement and move you towards more specific action plans. Look over the following questions and decide on one or two relevant questions to discuss from each section that relate to your above general goal area. Talk about those questions and record any clarifying insights below each section.

1. **Exploring relevance to mission, larger goals, and personal development:**
   - What do you hope to achieve within the next 3-5 years?
   - How does this goal fit with those hopes or dreams?
   - How can you get paid for doing what you love?
   - How does this development area tie into your job description, strategic initiatives, or personal development plan?
   - What are some potential benefits of developing yourself in this area?
   - Where does this development area fit into your priorities?
   - Who might your development impact (eg, your team, department, stakeholders, family)?

2. **Exploring specificity and attainability:**
   - What have you done previously to develop yourself?
   - What resources, people or otherwise, do you have access to that could help you in this development area (eg, for frequent feedback or encouragement)?
   - If you were to break this area down into skills and knowledge, what would be some of the most important aspects of what you want to learn?
   - What forces are helping you move toward this goal?
   - What forces are hindering achieving this goal?

3. **Exploring measurability and time issues:**
   - What are your current skill and experience bases?
   - What level of skill do you need in this area (eg, familiarity, passing a certification, recognition as an exemplary performer, ability to train others)?
   - To what degree are your goals capable of being measured?
   - What concrete activities will you be able to do as a result of achieving your goals?
   - When would you like to set the first progress check point and what should our evaluation criteria be?
   - Is the timeline in our mentoring agreement reasonable for what you want to accomplish?

When setting goals, remember to ask if they are SMART.

Are these goals:

Specific? Try to break large, general goals into smaller, more specific ones.

Measurable? Is there a way to track improvement? What are the most appropriate but simplest measures?

Attainable? Can it be done? Are you aiming for something that is unachievable?

Realistic? Are your goals realistic given your time, resources, priority, and motivation?

Time-bound? When will you complete the goal? Set intermediate but repeating goals for things you want to become a habit.

Mentoring meetings

The first meeting

The goal of the first meeting is to:
1. **Lay the foundation for your mentoring relationship**
2. **Discuss your mentoring goals/objectives**
3. **Plan your next meeting**

Conversation topics

The first meeting with your mentor is your chance to share your excitement and expectations around the possibilities of your relationship. Adequate preparation before and thoughtful self-reflection after your first meeting will ensure that the relationship gets off to the right start.

Prepare for the conversation:
1. **Develop your 'getting to know you' questions**
   a. What would I like to know about my mentor?
   b. What am I prepared to share about myself to build trust and rapport?

2. **Start to think about areas you would like to develop**
   a. What are 2 to 3 things that I want to accomplish this year and longer term?

Remember, the focus of your first meeting is for you and your mentor to get to know one another better. While you should come prepared to discuss potential development areas, you should not feel pressure to go there at the expense of rapport and trust building.

Concluding the meeting

- Before ending the meeting, agree on the frequency of your meetings and the type of meetings you will have (eg, WebEx, email, face-to-face, phone call)
- Ensure you have discussed your Mentoring Agreement Letter and agreed upon next steps to complete the letter
- Arrange your next meeting

Additional meetings

There are some preparation materials in the appendix of the handbook to assist you with your next meetings.

Preparation prior to the meeting
- Plan the content of the meeting:
  - Objectives/topics to discuss from the first meeting
  - Agenda
- Consider the type of meeting
  - WebEx, phone

Opening
- Consider how you will open the meeting

Plan discussion points for the meeting
- Key topics to go through from the last meeting
- Achievements
- Possible issues
- Possible challenging/supportive/probing questions

Concluding the meeting
- Plan the next meeting objectives
- Arrange the date, location, type of meeting

Additional general suggestions

1. Use a simple agenda that includes a brief relational check-in and a focus on one central goal for the meeting.

2. Keep a running list of questions and issues to discuss.

3. While concluding each meeting, decide what central issue you are going to focus on at the next meeting. This may change according to needs that arise unexpectedly, but it gives you a way to come to each meeting prepared.

4. Periodically review your goals and make sure you are both in agreement as to the general progress and direction of the relationship.

5. If relational issues arise, go back over the Mentoring Agreement Letter to see if a simple reaffirmation of your agreement and discussion of your concepts identified in the "Building a productive mentoring relationship" section are enough to refocus, redirect, or reenergize the relationship.

6. Keep things both fun and focused. Don't force meetings to go beyond what is being productive. While longer meetings may be helpful at the beginning to get things started, you many find scheduling half-hour meetings more effective and efficient as the relationship progresses. The key is staying focused on one major goal and coming prepared for dialog and discussion.

Common mentoring pitfalls

It is natural and expected for mentoring relationships to experience setbacks from time to time. Do your best to avoid or minimize these setbacks by being aware of the common mentoring pitfalls.

1. **Having unrealistic expectations for the relationship and focusing on too much, too soon**
   Be realistic about what the relationship can accomplish. Make sure that you clarify goals and expectations at the onset of the relationship and capture your thinking in the mentoring agreement.

2. **Getting sidetracked by personal stuff**
   The primary focus of your mentoring relationship is for you to develop your professional self. With that said, discussing personal information is not completely off limits. Asking your mentor about their weekend or a recent vacation or sharing similar information about yourself can be an effective step towards building rapport. Use your judgment – if you think that your conversations are veering down the wrong track, quickly refocus the conversation back to development areas.

3. **Expecting a mentor to provide all of the answers**
   Good mentors ask the right questions to help their learners/students uncover solutions and approaches that work for them.

4. **Being too nice or patient to the point that you are not saying what needs to be said**
   One of the 4 pillars to build productive mentoring relationships is the ability to act with courage when necessary. Failing to act with courage and deliver needed feedback to your mentor has the potential to damage your relationship. Remember, mentoring is a two-way street; each mentor has agreed to participate in this program because they are looking for development, too.

5. **Wanting to move too quickly through trust building**
   Trust is one of the 4 pillars to building an effective and productive mentoring relationship. Don't let the pressure to move quickly into tackling development areas cause you to bypass this critical step. See "Building a productive relationship" for steps you can take to build a trusting relationship with one another.

6. **Allowing yourself to get overly frustrated over the lack of progress made mentoring is an ongoing development process for both the learner/student and mentor**
   There will be periods of significant progress and periods where development stalls. Avoid the feelings of frustration by scheduling regular check-ins: Let one another know how the relationship is going. Seek feedback about how the relationship is going. Refer to the mentoring agreement and make changes, as needed.

7. **Being friends with your mentor at the expense of true development**
   The strongest mentoring relationships occur when two people have a rapport and respect for one another. From this rapport and respect, friendships develop and mentoring relationships grow stronger. Be careful not to let the friendship get in the way of your ability to appreciate one another's objective and direct developmental feedback and advice.

Real World Data Scientists as members of thesis/dissertation committees

Learners/students are welcome to request a Real World Data Scientist to be a member of their committee, as long as it aligns with all program and university policies and regulations. Learners/students are expected to have discussed their reasons with their university contacts for including a Real World Data Scientist on their committee ahead of time.

The committee member role

A committee member assists learners/students with specific aspects of their thesis or dissertation. A committee member from Merck & Co., Inc is likely to serve on the committee as either a subject matter expert on your particular topic or as a methodology expert. It is important for the student to clearly communicate to the Real World Data Scientist which role they are expected to fill.

Committee members are responsible for reading dissertation drafts and providing feedback to the candidate throughout the dissertation process. This process will require, but may not be limited to, the following tasks:

- Work with chair and candidate to determine a general timeline
- Review and provide timely feedback on drafts of chapters as needed
    - A reasonable guideline is not more than 10 business days' turnaround time upon receipt of a draft or a response to a learner/student. The committee member should reach out to the student if more time is needed beyond the 10 business days window
- Participate in proposal process and defense
- Be available to candidate for consultation as needed
- Actively participate in formal dissertation defense process
- To respect the power differential that exists between the committee member and the learner/student, be aware of the trust the candidate has placed in the committee member as a part of the overall committee

The learner role

Learners/students are responsible for leading the development of their thesis/dissertation, in collaboration with their thesis/dissertation chair, with support from the rest of the committee. It is the learners'/students' responsibility to clearly outline their expectations of the Real World Data Scientist as a committee member and clearly communicate the timeline for completion of the thesis/dissertation.

Communication

All communication between learners/students and members of the committee should be timely, respectful, and professional. Communication is a vital part of working with various members of the committee. Learners/students are expected to schedule periodic check-ins to ensure that the Real World Data Scientist is aware of progress and potential needs. Timely communication between the learner/student and mentor committee member is expected. Some guidelines to consider for timely communication:

- Email or telephone responses are expected within 3 business days
- Written feedback is expected within 10 business days, or communication indicating that additional time is needed should occur within those 10 business days

Tips for learners/students

Going through the thesis/dissertation process is a powerful opportunity to grow. Beyond just completing the work, it is an opportunity to network and build professional relationships.

Here are 6 key points that learners/students should keep in mind:

1. **It's your job, not theirs**
   The focus of thesis/dissertation is on you, the learner/student. Therefore, don't expect the committee member to do all the work. Their role is to facilitate the learner's/student's development, not do it for them. Take the initiative and follow up on agreed-upon goals.

2. **Think commitment, not lip service**
   Regular, ongoing contact is one of the most important building blocks for successful collaboration. There should be an agreement between the committee member and the learner/student regarding meeting on a regular and ongoing basis.

3. **Show up for the relationship**
   Be prepared before meetings with anything agreed-upon and with an issue to discuss that's important to the learner/student. There's always something to discuss since events have occurred between the current meeting and the last one. The issue need not be monumental; sometimes simple things can lead to great discussions and insights.

4. **Keep expectations realistic**
   Unstated assumptions or expectations can easily derail a relationship. To avoid this, the learner/student and committee member should both discuss expectations of each other and the relationship. When there's a change in expectations, discuss this as well. Relationships grow and change and so do expectations, so those agreed upon early on may not be the same later. Have periodic conversations to discuss mutual expectations.

5. **It's risky, but it's healthy**
   In many ways, the committee member serves as a mentor in the process. A mentoring relationship is not meant to make the learner/student comfortable with where they are. It should challenge them both professionally and personally. This can't happen unless the learner/student is willing to take risks.

6. **The elephant will crush you**
   Don't sit with an issue that the learner/student should discuss with the committee member; otherwise, it will severely impact and could derail the relationship. If something is not working in the relationship, chances are the committee member is feeling similarly, but neither one is taking the responsibility to deal with it.

Appendix

Mentoring Agreement Letter

Date:

Learner/student:

Mentor:

1. Goal(s)

2. Building a productive mentoring relationship

3. Schedule

Dealing with conflict

How do I handle conflict with my mentor?

Conflict can arise in any relationship, including in a mentoring relationship. When dealing with conflict, it is important to discern exactly what the conflict is that you are experiencing as well as the outcome you desire. Conflict between mentors and learners/students usually arises from misunderstanding, differing opinions, or misinterpretation.

It is also important to understand the difference between conflict and personal attacks. Conflict is a natural result of two unique individuals interacting and challenging each other, especially in a development environment, and has positive benefits. Personal attacks are when differences shift from the issue or opinion, causing the conflict to the personalities or individuals involved. Personal attacks are usually highly volatile because they are emotionally driven (by anger or frustration) and based on perceptions about someone's character or motives. When conflict manifests into personal attacks, the original issues are no longer the problem because the conflict has ceased to be rational and has now become personality-centered. Based on this distinction between conflict and personal attacks, consider the following recommendations for managing conflict.

To successfully manage conflict you need to be able to:

- Develop a supportive rather than defensive environment
- Clearly understand what you want to happen
- Explicitly express why you feel there is conflict
- Listen openly and accurately to feedback
- Check the meaning behind the messages you are giving and receiving
- Seek to identify a common goal through compromise
- Discuss the issues (use facts rather than opinions)
- Stay solution-focused

Dealing with conflict: Best practices

When dealing with conflict, remember the following best practices:

- **Withhold judgments**
  If your intent is to find an amicable agreement, you will need to suspend personal judgments. It is best if you keep an open mind during your discussions and not project an attitude of condescension. You do not have to agree with your mentor's position, but you must acknowledge its legitimacy and at least agree to disagree. Use "I" statements since they describe your thoughts and feelings, instead of "you" statements, which carry a tone of judgment that can be misunderstood as censure.

- **Speak precisely**
  Be specific and avoid speaking in generalities. Resist the urge to drag a negative past into the present situation. To accomplish this, reference present circumstances without restating previous misgivings.

- **Remain considerate**
  Avoid stating opinion as fact. Be careful not to speak down to or insult the intelligence of your mentor. Be patient with learning; move at the mentor's pace in the conversation. Do not interrupt or project frustration.

- **Focus your discussion**
  Clarify points of agreement before dealing with disagreements. This helps to build common ground of understanding, save discussion time, and locate the focus of your discussion. Also, attempt to focus on one issue at a time to help avoid confusion.

- **Balance your communication**
  Express your thoughts and needs clearly, directly, and in a balanced manner, respecting the thoughts, needs, and rights of your mentor.