

EDITORIAL

Mentorship in practice: what to expect and how to build a successful mentoring relationship

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Received: 18th November 2025

Accepted: 21st November 2025

Online: 25th November 2025

Introduction

Following the first editorial in the August issue of *JVSGBI*,¹ which outlined the value of structured mentorship in vascular surgery, this second editorial highlights what participants can expect from a mentorship programme and the core principles of starting an effective mentoring relationship, using the VSGBI mentorship programme as an example.

Mentorship programme structure

The design of the mentorship programme should balance structure with flexibility, providing a supportive framework that guides mentoring relationships without being prescriptive. The aim is to allow mentor and mentee to develop a partnership that reflects their individual needs, goals and aspirations.

Matching and Development Day: Mentors and mentees should be matched based on interests and goals. An in-person Development Day led by mentorship experts facilitates description of the process outline and introduces reflective practice, communication skills, boundaries and core mentoring principles.

Ongoing meetings and support: Pairs are encouraged to commit a minimum of 6 hours over 12 months, with additional informal contact as needed. VSGBI will also conduct checkpoints throughout to help maintain momentum.

Programme evaluation: Feedback is essential to identify and overcome barriers. Evaluation is planned for the VSGBI mentorship programme at three key stages: a post-matching check-in to confirm initial meetings have taken place and clarify any further support requirements; a midpoint survey at 5–6 months to assess

progress and impact; and a final survey at 12 months on completion to evaluate overall value, outcomes and impact, to help inform next steps.

Establishing trust and building rapport

Trust is the foundation of any mentoring relationship. Early conversations should focus on getting to know one another, exploring backgrounds and motivations and agreeing communication preferences and boundaries. The NIHR Mentorship Scheme² highlights that early rapport is critical for open, honest and constructive dialogue.

The Development Day plays a key role in helping pairs establish rapport. Mentees are then encouraged to take ownership by arranging the first meeting. Many pairs benefit from creating a short mentoring agreement covering expectations, confidentiality, meeting format and practical arrangements. Taking brief notes after each session helps track learning and progress.

Setting direction and agreeing goals

Once rapport and trust are established, mentoring pairs should focus on setting a clear direction for their relationship. Early conversations provide an opportunity to explore the mentee's motivations, whether developing leadership skills, navigating complex clinical decisions, building confidence, supporting wellbeing or planning career progression. Clarifying these aims helps ensure both parties are aligned and that the mentor's experience can be applied most effectively.

From these discussions, the pair can agree on a small number of realistic goals to guide the first 6–12 months. These goals provide focus for future meetings and a framework to track

Key words: early-career consultants, mentorship, professional development

Table 1 Key actions for starting a mentoring relationship

Action	Purpose/guidance
Preparation	<i>Reviewing preparatory guidance before starting the relationship.</i> This ensures both mentor and mentee begin with a shared understanding of expectations and core principles.
Mentee-led initiation	<i>The mentee makes first contact and arranges the initial meeting.</i> This reinforces mentee ownership and sets the tone for an active engaged partnership.
Focus on rapport	<i>Using the first one or two meetings to explore backgrounds, experiences and motivations.</i> This builds trust and establishes the relational foundation needed for open constructive dialogue.
Discuss expectations	<i>Clarifying confidentiality, boundaries, communication preferences, meeting format and frequency.</i> This creates psychological safety and supports productive well-structured conversations.
Mentoring agreement	<i>Creating a brief agreement that outlines expectations, responsibilities and early objectives.</i> This provides clarity, shared understanding and confidence for both participants.
Capturing progress	<i>Taking brief notes after each session to record key themes and learning points.</i> This supports continuity, reflection and tracking of development over time.

Adapted from NIHR Guidance 'Beginning the Mentoring Relationship'²

progress. Importantly, goals are not static and revisiting them periodically allows the relationship to adapt to the mentee's evolving needs and priorities.

Reflection is central throughout the process. Considering what is working well, identifying challenges and defining what success looks like helps both mentor and mentee shape a purposeful, dynamic and impactful partnership.

Launching a meaningful mentoring journey

Effective mentorship begins with trust, rapport and clear goals. By investing in the early stages of the relationship and engaging fully in the process, mentoring pairs can create productive goal-focused partnerships.

Table 2 Key actions for goal setting

Action	Purpose/guidance
Clarify motivations	<i>Discussing why the mentee has sought mentoring and what they hope to achieve.</i> This ensures early alignment around purpose, challenges and developmental priorities.
Set clear goals	<i>Agreeing on 2–4 specific realistic goals for the first 6–12 months.</i> This provides focus, direction and a structured basis for reviewing progress.
Align expectations	<i>Checking that the mentee's goals match the mentor's experience and capacity.</i> This supports a well-matched partnership and ensures meaningful, relevant guidance.
Use reflective questions	<i>Incorporating prompts such as "What would success look like?" or "What changes do you hope to see?"</i> This deepens reflection and helps refine priorities and intentions.
Review regularly	<i>Revisiting goals every few meetings and adapting them as needs evolve.</i> This keeps the relationship relevant, responsive and aligned with the mentee's development.

Adapted from NIHR Guidance 'Beginning the Mentoring Relationship'²

As the first VSGBI mentorship cohort begins their mentoring journey, the programme represents an investment in strong productive partnerships that offer both guidance and professional growth. We look forward to seeing how these mentor–mentee pairs develop and make the most of the opportunities ahead.

Conflict of Interest: None.

Funding: None.

References

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