

By Kevin F. Boehnke

Cheating on my mentor

For the first 2 years of my Ph.D. program, my primary adviser was always available when I needed help, promptly responding to emails and meeting with me when questions arose. But that abruptly changed when he went on sabbatical and left the country. My emails were rarely answered, and our scheduled meetings were often canceled. I did what I could to push my research forward on my own, but I felt I was floundering. I grew frustrated and uncertain about my future, even questioning whether I wanted to pursue a research career. After sufficient wallowing in self-pity, however, I decided to take matters into my own hands by seeking the support that I needed.

Haphazardly, I started building a broader network of mentors. I reached out to collaborators, committee members, teachers, and friends to ask for advice about my research and career development. It was nerve-wracking to call on people I didn't know well or hadn't spoken to about these topics before. I didn't always get responses, nor were the responses I received always helpful. But several patient people listened, gave judicious advice, and connected me to others with whom I had shared interests. Others generously gave their time to help me develop side projects and novel hypotheses, offering suggestions based on their expertise. These relationships and experiences lifted my spirits, broadened my perspective, and reignited my interest in research.

After being away for several months, my primary adviser re-emerged. I was excited to have his insights again, but I feared that he might not approve of the additional mentoring I had sought out. However, instead of being upset that I had "cheated" on him, he was pleased. He recognized that the new perspectives added value and context to our work, and he encouraged me to continue.

From that point on, I deliberately pursued this team mentorship model. My advisers, people with varied perspectives and expertise, didn't necessarily work together or even meet. Nonetheless, they were my team in the sense that they supported my growth as a public health researcher. For example, one adviser encouraged me to participate in a workshop about computational methods for policy-related research, which at the time was outside my comfort zone. I came away with a better understanding of how to design research for maximum real-world impact, which I have since used to shape my studies. Overall, the support I received from my team of mentors helped me become more confident



“Haphazardly, I started building a broader network of mentors.”

in pursuing my own ideas, which ultimately helped me find deep satisfaction in my Ph.D. work. When I moved on to my postdoc, I sought out and found a research group that explicitly prioritizes team science.

Building and maintaining relationships with several mentors rather than one takes time and adds complexity to my life. During my Ph.D. work, for example, negotiating reasonable milestones with multiple mentors required more effort up front, and some of my proposed experiments took far longer to design as I assimilated advice from experts in a variety of disciplines. However, these front-loaded costs paid off. My research was both more impactful scientifically and more meaningful to me personally. Moreover, I learned to communicate across disciplines

and get people with different viewpoints on the same page—skills that are at the core of my work in public health.

Many students I know refer to their mentor as an individual with a larger-than-life persona, the arbiter of success and failure. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it can place undue strain on both the mentor and the student, leading to frustration and power struggles. As I learned firsthand, it is not realistic to always expect immediate feedback, exhaustive answers, and quick and productive meetings all from a single individual, who is, after all, human, with their own life and career to foster. With my mentoring team, I receive different things from different people, and incorporating their perspectives into my work has enriched both my research and my life. ■

Kevin F. Boehnke is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is indebted to his many mentors. Do you have an interesting career story? Send it to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT NEUBECKER