

Editorial

Managing your life's path

Lifelong learning and lifelong mentorship are parts of everyone's path through life. In some cases the topics are separate, but in most instances they are interleaved. Both include a focus on oneself, one's goals, and a vast array of information and advice from others. Both require awareness that you never will know everything and can always gain from the wisdom of others who might be seniors, peers, or juniors. Great age does not necessarily imply greater wisdom or grander experience [Stoller, 2016]. You must be continually learning and seek continual mentoring. The challenge for each of us is to "effectively manage" these processes so that we succeed at the highest levels. Let's start by considering processes and then consider how to manage them.

Lifelong learning and mentoring can be analyzed in terms of quartiles for an 80-year lifespan (see Figure below). While it is possible that one mentor might dominate at any single point, you need many mentors at all times. Shifting demands of the quartiles (personal life, emotional life, professional life) tend to shift the emphasis on the type of learning or mentorship that is helpful.

Periods in Life	0-20 years (Defining career)	21-40 years (Early career)	41-60 years (Mid-career)	61-80 years (Late career)
Lifelong learning	Grade schools, University	Continuing Education	Continuing Education	Continuing Education
Lifelong mentoring	Parents, Teachers, Role models	Role models, Peers, Coaches, Mentors	Peers, Mentors	Mentors
Lifelong management		5-year plans and daily schedules		

My own career has been almost entirely an academic one, and thus, my comments will focus on that path for convenience. Comments which follow are relevant to most paths in life. In an academic career, the professional targets are often parsed into excellence in teaching, research, service, clinical practice, administration, and/or leadership. Recognize immediately that it would be rare to discover someone expert in all of these and who also was accessible to you as a continual mentor. Rather, in your life you will encounter many possible mentors, and try to absorb what each has to offer.

Mentors are packaged in different ways. For the present discussion, it is not necessary to distinguish the quality and quantity of their types of help. We will simply collect all coaches, guides, peers, role models, or formal mentors together as simply "mentors." This could include the first teacher who inspired you. It could include anyone living or not whose actions provided a role model. It could include a coach assigned for special help in professional development. Importantly, the advice or directions that you receive from mentors will need to be digested to produce a plan for your life. To make a plan work, you will need a management system to insure you meet your goals.

Management

You may not know all of your life's goals at the start, but you must clearly organize a plan to accomplish short-term goals and effectively move forward. Remember that the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. What is proposed next is a "management system" to insure that your lifelong learning and mentoring have a framework to succeed. Thus, management involves: (a) personal strategic planning (5-year plans), (b) daily scheduling, (c) periodic outcome assessment, and (d) guidelines for major decision-making. Let's address each one in detail.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5335/rfo.v21i1>.

Throughout your entire life, it is very helpful to use 5-year plans as a means of major personal organization. Identify 2 or 3 major items to accomplish during each 5-year period (e.g., completing thesis, publication of 10 papers, promotion, major leadership role, owning your own dental practice, achieving a certain financial security, ...). Goals must be achievable. Be very thoughtful and careful in making this list. Challenge yourself, but be careful to make a list that is rationale and for which progress can be easily monitored. If your goal were to publish 10 papers in 5-years, it would be easy to see where you were at any point in time. The 5-year plan should not be changed without major justification. It should guide your overall path. At any moment of any day, it should easily recallable. In successive 5-year plans, the goals will be different, assuming you accomplished the previous ones.

Next you require daily action plans to keep yourself on schedule. There are two objectives here – (a) to organize your day in detail based on steps needed to achieve your plan, and (b) manage daily priorities with the other parts of your life. Set aside specific times for each item for each day. Record all the details of every actual day, and then you can analyze your progress. Leave some free time in your schedule for contingencies. Be honest about the time you need to allocate to get things done. Parse larger tasks into smaller ones. Your daily calendar should guide your day. It will include daily activities, short-term projects, and longer-term tasks. It will provide the discipline you need to stay focused. Put the toughest items for each day first in your schedule to make sure that you get them done first and well. This is one of the hardest things for most people to do. It is natural to procrastinate or delay. Generally, folks make a schedule and then avoid items they do not like or do not want to tackle. But, if you get the tough things done first, the rest of the day is much more pleasurable. Do not accept responsibilities without putting them into your schedule with time allocated to complete them. Continually adjust your schedule and move uncompleted tasks into your future schedule. Here is an extreme example of parsing to accomplish a difficult task. A typical scientific paper is about 30 paragraphs [Bayne, 2003]. There is a standard formula for what should be included in each of the paragraphs and that forms the outline for your manuscript. To write a paper, take the first 30 minutes of each day for a month and write just a single paragraph (4-5 sentences). You can write the needed paragraphs in any order, and in the end, you will have a draft of your manuscript.

For academic careers, one way map the plan in action is to modify your Curriculum Vitae with place holders for the things you are trying to accomplish. Make your CV look like you want it to be at the end of 5-years and keep filling in the holes. Your CV becomes your action item map. Whenever you have to consider any professional choices, go to this map and make sure that you are staying on the path. Do not take on responsibilities or make time commitments that do not move you effectively along this path [Bayne, 1993]. One of the great distractors is to take on secondary responsibilities or become involved in a significant administrative role that could prevent completion of your major goals. Stay on target. Keep a steady pace. Review your progress monthly. Finally, reward yourself as you complete parts of the plan. Take a vacation or a special trip. Use those rewards to encourage your commitment. You will always have something to pleausurably anticipate. Plan a one-week vacation every quarter of every year to always have a reason to look forward.

Five year plans help you manage the major portion of your career. However, during those same times, they will be interesting options that could disrupt your plan. Someone may want to hire you away to a new job or offer alternatives to your career. You may agonize over these decisions. Change always causes some dislocation and set-back in your schedule. Typically taking a new job will delay progress on your 5-year plan by 1-2 years and could impact the future time available for your plan considerably. Your challenge is to decide if and when to make big changes. Here is a personal guideline that has worked very well. Whenever a new job possibility arises, apply the following analysis. I required that: (1) my spouse be happy and employed in a related field or by the same employer; (2) we have the opportunity to live close to work so that we do not waste time commuting; (3) we live close to a major metropolitan airport that fit our lifestyle of travel for work and play; (4) I personally feel intellectually challenged by the new environment; and (5) that we increase our personal wealth and retirement options significantly by the move. If every one of those requirements could not be met, then I rejected the option quickly. Many are allured by the salary offers and accept poor personal and/or environmental conditions that ultimately create dissatisfaction. There will always be a stream of good career options coming your way, if you are doing a good job. Do not jump at the first one. Require that all your personal requirements are met.

Final Thoughts

Eat the elephant steadily but thoughtfully. There is a desire by many to succeed quickly and collect success early in one's career. Enjoy the moment. Pace your career. Decide the best time for your successes. Consider the following two situations. The first involves professional service. You are part of a large professional society and its leaders want you to be considered for officership that would lead to becoming

the President at some point. Responsibilities of the President include travel, representation in major professional forums, and considerable time investment for management of the society. You love the honor, want to travel, and look forward to the leadership challenges, but at this particular point in your life you are balancing the strains of a re-organized professional practice, a new child, and a recent house move. You have no time to allocate to all these competing demands, much less time to enjoy all roles. Therefore, postpone this leadership option until it fits your circumstances more appropriately. The second example involves personal stress. You are trying to manage too much personal, emotional, and/or professional stress. You are not sleeping. You cannot see a path to accomplishing all your responsibilities, much less your goals. Sit down and redefine your schedule. Take things off of your plate. Postpone professional goals. Eliminate responsibilities. Make your plate manageable and comfortable.

Life is far too short to not be fully enjoyed. Manage everything. Wisely make choices. Pace yourself. Celebrate your success.

Stephen C. Bayne
Emeritus Professor
School of Dentistry
University of Michigan

References

Stoller E. Multiple mentors = lifelong mentoring. [cited 2016 August 20]. Available from URL:<http://ericstoller.com/blog/2010/08/28/multiple-mentors-lifelong-mentoring/>.

Bayne SC. The path. (Editorial). *Dent Mater* 1993; 9(1):72.

Bayne SC, McGivney GP, Mazer SC. Scientific composition and review of manuscripts for publication in peer-reviewed dental journals. *J Prosthet Dent* 2003; 89:201-18.