



A Guide to Effective Distance Mentoring

There are many alums unable to reach Cambridge regularly who still wish to serve as first generation mentors to students. At the same time, many mentees benefit from face-to-face sessions with their mentors, and appreciate geographical proximity. Achieving the goals of a mentor–mentee relationship may seem daunting at a distance, but distance mentoring can succeed as mentors and mentees consider the needs that their geographical circumstances pose, and as they use their instincts and common sense to manage the relationship.

Developing and maintaining relationships of all kinds at a distance are becoming more common as media technology enables greater connectivity with individuals and organizations from afar. With this brief guide, we offer some advice to help make distance mentoring effective and manageable for both mentors and mentees who are not able to be in in-person contact regularly.

- 1. Prepare and plan:** This is sound advice for all mentor-mentee relationships, but it is particularly important when mentoring at a distance. We recognize that the ideal case would be to establish the relationship in an initial face-to-face meeting, and then continue at a distance with some occasional face-time. In the case where meeting face-to-face initially is not possible, relying on the structure provided by the mentoring program can be especially handy: for example, establishing clear expectations on the basis of mutually-agreed upon goals, reiterating your commitment to both the program and your mentee, and putting extra effort into preparing, planning, and continuously building the relationship. You may want to have a loose agenda ready for each call/video call, map out the frequency and timing of calls/video calls (even though they will change, it creates the expectation and accountability to support you both), take stock of what was discussed in the previous call/video call (perhaps even keep general notes in a personal file created for each of your mentees), and at the end of one call/video call, plan the next.
- 2. Schedule the next meeting at the start:** Most mentors will find that it is toughest to start the relationship and get to know your mentee well enough to be able to really be a useful resource to them. This challenge can be exacerbated by distance. Try planning and scheduling a few additional meetings at the beginning – the first one, two, or even three through November. Putting the effort early on to speak every few weeks should prove useful in getting to know each other and overcome the impression that distance mentoring will be impersonal.
- 3. Take advantage of widely available and free video technology:** We strongly advise you to use a video calling service. There are many different, and free, services available, including many accessible through smartphones and tablets as well as computers. A few common services are listed below. Make sure that you agree with your mentee which service is feasible for them. (If you are not accustomed to these and need help, reach out to FGHA.) Whichever service you use, remember to speak slowly and clearly and look into the camera when speaking and listening.

You also may find it helpful to pause before responding to a comment from your mentee, too. Even the best traditional listeners may find the awkward nature of video calls to be difficult.

- Skype (some mentors find the phone line option is more reliable than the internet-based connection)
- Google Hangout
- Facetime

4. Use email effectively: We know that email is a quick-and-easy way to communicate, but make sure to reflect about its place and function as part of the mentoring relationship. First, it should not become the main form of communication with your mentee(s). Verbal conversation cannot be replaced by written exchanges. Second, the risk of misunderstandings due to email is always fairly high. We have all been on the sending or receiving end of an email that was not understood the way it was intended. And especially, try not to rely on email for delivering meaningful messages. Below are some basic rules of thumb for email use.

- Email is suitable for:
 - Arranging and verifying calls/video calls or other logistics;
 - Sharing online resources (e.g. sharing articles/links related to your mentee's interests or ambitions and from which you think your mentee will get value);
 - Posing non time-urgent questions;
 - Maintaining a sense of contact when one or both partners are finding it difficult to schedule mutual time (which should be the exception, not the rule);
 - Responding to issues or questions where writing is the best way to address a particular issue as indicated by the mentee.
- Email is not suitable for:
 - Communicating anything that can be interpreted in more ways than one;
 - Sharing impressions or feelings;
 - Giving (especially critical) feedback.

Beyond email, we also suggest you exercise caution with social media (e.g. Twitter) and professional networks (e.g. LinkedIn).

5. Get in touch between meetings: Touch base with your mentee between established/regular call/video call times to ensure they know that you are "there," even if you are not able to be more "present" (e.g. share a link to an article or other online resource that you think they will get something out of). It shows you are thinking of them and reminds them of your, albeit remote or online, presence.

6. Listen carefully: Non-verbal cues are less obvious when communication is not face-to-face. Some non-verbal cues will be apparent if you are able to do video calls, but most video feeds, understandably, are limited to headshots. It therefore is a must to become a careful listener. You have prepared and planned your general agenda for your call/video call as if it would be for a face-to-face meeting. Still there's a major difference: you are not physically present. For instance, there are limits to observing each other's reactions and body language, and communicating back on the basis of such (non-verbal) feedback or information. It is important to pay attention to the tone and volume in which things are said, as well as any silences, sighs and pauses – to understand the way the person you're conversing with is feeling. At the same

time, you cannot rely on body language (e.g. nodding, smiling, etc.) to communicate that you are listening and understanding. Below are some tips.

- Play back what you are hearing/sensing by saying, “So I am hearing XYZ....Is that right?”;
- Push for specifics by asking follow-up questions to get your mentee to verbally articulate thoughts and opinions;
- Summarize agreements (e.g. subjects you are planning to cover in the next call).

Additional Resources: [Resources for Behavioral Science Researchers](#)

We welcome your feedback on this guide and suggestions for improvement based on your experience.