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Mentors and Intrinsic Motivators: A Quick Reference Guide

In my experience (as mentee and mentor), identifying a good mentoring match begins with understanding the various styles mentors adopt and why. If you're evaluating a prospective mentor, a key to anticipating mentoring style is discerning the person's primary intrinsic motivator as a scientist.

Similarly, if you're seeking to improve an existing relationship with a mentor you find especially challenging to work with, take time to discover his or her primary motivator - and then reflect on how best to appeal to that. (Ideally, both mentee and mentor need to find out what motivates each other.)

Once you understand the mentoring style you're dealing with, you have to strategize about how to work most effectively with that person - or consider alternatives. You do have the final option, ultimately.

Here's a list of primary motivators that distinguish scientific mentors, and tips on optimal approach to each.

Mentor's Primary Motivator	Mentee's Optimal Approach
Papers	Only talk about this and not much else. Not interested.
Feeling helpful	Get items 95% prepared and ask for their help and guidance in completing it
Efficiency	Complaining to these types will get nowhere. Bring in 5% problem and 90% solution and 5% is their OK.
Recognition	They work hard. They're human. Feeling underappreciated is common. Tell them life's hard, you understand and are grateful.
Fighting	Some mentors (like people), are aggressive. High adrenaline helps them solve issues. Not all mentees can handle this though. Conversely, some mentees thrive in this environment. Others will be crushed. Mentees need to know themselves and avoid a mismatch
Avoiding	These mentors will not respond to confrontation and will withdraw into passive aggression. Set hard times and deadlines and begin and end positively.
Wants ownership	Sometimes hard to deal with but giving everyone ownership takes away desire to fight and silo. Sharing persons always come out ahead. People like to work with and for them. Makes them feel like team.
Money	Everything has to lead to a grant mentality. This can seem like overkill but research also requires money so thinking about publication and grant worthiness most of the time can be a good thing.
Legacy	These are the best persons to work for and with. They have fought enough, don't have to struggle for survival, and have momentum in whatever they've chosen; they are now committed to pushing as many committed persons forward as they feel they can.