

# —President's Message

*“Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen and a push in the right direction.”*

—John C. Crosby (1859-1943), U.S. politician and businessperson

In 1999, my wife and I spent a few days in Japan after the OSA Optical Amplifier meeting that took place in Nara. I went to visit the president of Matsushita in Osaka, who years earlier had been my father's boss in Panasonic in New Jersey, USA. The inscription on the gift I gave him read: “You are my father's cherished mentor.” He beamed and said that this was the highest compliment that he could receive.

As his reaction suggests, mentorship is a two-way street. It is about building a relationship that transcends age, status and position. It is about wanting to help and wanting to be helped. A mentor-mentee relationship takes time to develop and nurture—it's difficult to define, yet critical. And such a relationship is orders-of-magnitude harder to build on the phone or on Skype than it is in person.

OSA is blessed with many caring, giving, wise people who can be mentors, and offers vehicles through which people can develop relationships. Yet mentorship is often overlooked by extremely busy people who may not stay in one job for too long, or by those for whom the internet may be their primary mode of interaction. Roughly ten years ago, Scott Hinton of the University of Utah, USA, told me he didn't think mentorship was as strong as it was when he started in his career. In my opinion, it is even tougher today.

Amid those challenges, OSA's conferences and meetings provide a golden opportunity to begin, and evolve, mentor-mentee relationships. Yet such ties can't be forced; they require the right personal chemistry and need to develop organically. They are more about advice and perspective than about direct favors. And they can make the difference between a mediocre career and a great one.

Mentors can take many forms and help in numerous ways. The relationship is amorphous and different for each pair of people. One needs mentors at all points in a career—indeed, several of them, to make that career multifaceted. I have several mentors, and I am, I hope, a mentor to several as well. It creates the interwoven fabric that is OSA.

At one point while a postdoc at Bell Labs, I was quite worried about looking for my next job, and my work suffered. Julian Stone, an older, wiser person, came into the lab and metaphorically kicked me in the behind. “Stop moping,” he said. “Just get back to work. That's the only thing that will really help you.” Sure enough, my best work came in the next few weeks, and I was able to talk about it in my subsequent job interviews. The only reason he spoke to me was because he cared and wanted to help.

Being a mentor is about wanting to see someone else succeed and imparting some experience and wisdom. It is satisfying and fulfilling. There is also no magic in being a mentee—be genuine, eager, humble and thankful.

At the next OSA conference, look around you. Your next mentor, or mentee, might be just a poster session away.



OSA

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Respectfully and warmly submitted,

*Alan Willner,  
OSA President*