What Having the Right Mentor Has Meant for Me

Yasser Said, MD
Despite the success I experienced relatively early in my career, I would have been utterly lost if it wasn’t for the interest several physician advisors took in my development.

My introduction to physician advisors occurred when I began attending meetings of the utilization management committee at the hospital where I practiced. While I had served on a number of committees in the past, and was fairly familiar with utilization due to practicing inpatient medicine, it was still a thrill to be invited by the current physician advisor, Jon, to attend the committee meetings.

All the big shots were there, most of whom I didn’t recognize. The chief medical officer always attended, and usually there were at least one or two other members from the C Suite. I also recognized many of the more influential and successful physicians on the medical staff.

The utilization management committee was fun. We looked at all kinds of data, mostly hospital wide quality metrics. Sometimes I wondered if spending so much time reviewing data was the best way to get things done, but it sure was interesting to watch all the physicians, utilization review nurses, IT folks, and administrators go back and forth about what the data meant, and what conclusions could be drawn from it. Those discussions got pretty heated, especially if a physician felt that the way the data was being parsed reflected unfairly on their practice. Someone seemed to feel that way just about every time.

Jon would pull me aside after most of the meetings. Well, let’s be honest – I would usually try and seek him out. I looked up to him. He was a very successful and experienced generalist who just seemed more savvy than I was about the business and politics of medicine.

There was evidence of how he had translated that savvy into achievements. He had served as physician advisor for many years, and had negotiated a very nice compensation package from the hospital by breaking down how his efforts provided a return on investment. Jon also was very well placed in a variety of influential committees, and he seemed to have the ear of just about everyone in the hospital and in his practice.

He would break things down for me – which members of the committee had which agenda, what the relationships were, and how past events in the hospital were influencing things. It was fascinating, and it also saved me from making some serious gaffes. While it couldn’t save me completely, as I still managed to put my foot in my mouth at times, it would have been so much worse without that advice. Jon also helped me find information I needed, which was a real challenge. As you may have noticed, there is no playbook out there for being a physician advisor, or even a physician leader. Jon helped fill in those gaps.

One of the best things about these sessions was that it taught me a new way to look at things. Sure, I grew up with the same cliches that everyone else does, about understanding other people’s point of view. The difference was, now I was getting real life examples of why it was important. And that made me really see some of my own blind spots.

If I add up all the time I spent talking with Jon, it couldn’t have been more than six or seven hours in a year. But those discussions were so valuable, and a large part of it was that he believed in my potential and wanted me to do well.

After I assumed my first physician advisor position, I met my next great mentor. This was a physician advisor, Greg, with even more experience. The first thing I noticed was how he handled
himself, in particular the patience he had. Whenever he ran the meetings with the other medical directors and physician advisors, he carried himself so well and was able to keep things flowing smoothly without interrupting. Greg didn't need to say much, but when he spoke, the room was his.

I began to really pay attention to what he was doing, and I started trying to emulate some of the same things that he did that worked well. I saw an impact, and I started noticing that I was getting better results without having to assert myself or dominate as I sometimes had a tendency to do. This was encouraging, because it meant that I could learn calmness and self discipline it wasn't an innate quality that I was born with or without.

Eventually, I started seeking him out after the meetings for a few minutes. Usually he would be talking with some other group of folks who needed to discuss some topic on care management, Medicare compliance, physician alignment, or any of the many other topics that physician advisors engage with. Those discussions were great to hear, and everyone was going to this guy for advice.

One of the best things was that I could ask him any questions. When you're in a room with a group that is a lot more experienced, it can be intimidating. They take a lot of knowledge for granted that you don't have yet. And it's not like there's a Bible on being a physician advisor to help guide you. If you need to know how to do your job (and even knowing what that job exactly was could be a challenge), you had to cobble information together from multiple sources. But I just had the immediate sense that I could ask any question, simple or complex, and get an answer with no prejudgment.

My next mentor was a physician advisor who only had a little more experience than I did. Jenn had a different temperament from my other mentors. She had a strong force of will, was very extroverted, and was a natural networker. Because of all her connections in the hospital, she could approach any physician with issues in a natural way. “Sam, how are you doing? Did you enjoy your trip? I noticed that our patient with the pneumonia is still in the hospital but the care managers told me she was doing pretty well. Anything we can do to help with her dispo?”

The difference in learning from Jenn, as opposed to my other mentors, was that she had an abundance of natural ability but was just one step ahead of me in her career. That meant that she remembered what it was like to be new, to make mistakes, and to try and integrate my administrative duties with the other parts of my professional and home life. Her advice was invaluable. It was like walking through a forest path in the dark, and having someone just a few steps ahead of you holding a flashlight and telling you where to step.

Things have really moved along since then, and my career trajectory is definitely on the right path. I'm still in touch with my mentors, and sometimes it feels like I need more guidance, not less, as I gain more responsibilities. It really is good to have someone in my corner.

The expectations on physician leaders are more varied and complex than they have ever been. Challenging organizational structures, complex regulation, and forceful personalities require strong interpersonal skills as well as solid medical and business acumen for success. I have been fortunate to have the support of mentorship to help guide me through this environment. This is why we founded IndusMente, to connect aspiring physician leaders to the experienced mentors and knowledge necessary to help guide them in this increasingly challenging environment.
We match and connect developing professionals with the right mentor for them, crossing geographic barriers to put them in contact via our digital meeting platform. We also provide research and analysis on the topics that are most important to aspiring leaders – such as how to calculate their ROI to their organization, how to effectively implement a program, or techniques for consensus building. I have firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by a physician leader, and have committed to provide all the tools necessary to help other professionals make the same leap.