

# Struggling to build your learning network? A coach can help

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The old saying goes, “No man is an island,” and this is especially true of the physician. Every day, doctors rely on others in their personal learning networks—webs of mentors, advisers, friends, colleagues and subject-matter experts who provide support, information and platforms for personal and professional growth.

Following are highlights from “How can coaching help me build successful personal learning networks?”, Chapter 8 of *It Takes Two: A Guide to Being a Good Coachee*. This is a handbook focusing on what learners need to know to get the most out of a coaching relationship. It was produced by the [AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium](#).

## Why you need one

“Quite simply, we cannot go about this alone,” wrote the authors, Kellen Haley, MD, Mary Haas, MD, MHPE, and Sally A. Santen, MD, PhD, all affiliated with Michigan Medicine when they wrote this chapter.

“Personal learning networks are anchors through which you gain mentorship, coaching, inspiration and, more importantly, mobility and opportunities to link to members of different areas where you may not have otherwise found yourself,” the authors added. “The old notion of needing to know the ‘what and how’ to answer every problem and doing everything on your own has been replaced by knowing where to find answers you don’t have, especially through other’s ideas, skills or resources.”

A personal learning network supplies these connections, helping you grow professionally, stay current in your field, develop new areas of interest and adapt throughout your career.

Learn more about [how medical students can benefit from coaching in medicine](#).

## Where to start

Your coach is not responsible for making personal ties for you, but the coach can help you identify connections, group them within your network and find growth areas. When meeting with your coach about how to improve your network, the authors suggested using the following framework to guide your discussions.

**Step 1: Identify the elements or interests that are most important to your development and education.** You might consult the WOOP (Wish, Outcome, Obstacles, Plan) or SMART (Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Relevant, Time-Based) models for goal-setting.

**Step 2: List your strong connections, weak connections and mentors.** Then map those connections into the areas of academic network, expertise network, professional identity network and informal communities using the template on page 56 of the handbook.

Strong ties, who may include mentors and research advisers, are the foundation of your personal learning network, but weak ties “are where the mobility and growth of your network takes place—don’t neglect them!” the authors wrote. “These are likely to be members of other professions, undergraduate colleagues or family connections.”

**Step 3: Identify five people you would like to add to your personal learning network.** Keep in mind that distant acquaintances can expose you to opportunities and ways of thinking that are unknown to your closest contacts.

**Step 4: Determine the actions and skills you need to expand it.** Be honest with your coach about your goals, strengths and weaknesses.

“Your coach can help you brainstorm ways to improve relationships, find new directions and provide tips on how to maintain your network,” the authors wrote. “Your ultimate goal with your coach should be to form strong ties, identify weak ties, seek out new nodes and maintain established nodes.”

## Putting your plan into action

One of the keys to getting your plan off the page and into use is building your personal learning network on social media, particularly Twitter, the authors noted. The chapter features a worksheet to use with your coach to reflect on your interests and goals and then discuss how to translate these into your online professional identity.

A corresponding text, *Coaching in Medical Education: A Faculty Handbook*, provides an academic



coaching framework for educators, as well as tools to provide professional development and assistance to learners in medical education.