

## Pfizer's mentoring maestro hones his craft

**A**sked about his earliest experience being mentored, Stuart Sowder is quick with an answer. “Oh, my father was my first, absolutely. He encouraged me to go into the pharmacy business. The thinking was that I’d have a license I could use for life.” Sowder pauses, then continues. “So I went to pharmacy school at Rutgers—and I didn’t love it. All my friends were sitting under trees and reading these great novels, while I was busy memorizing stuff.”

Sowder laughs as he recalls the origins of a career that has landed him in a pivotal role at Pfizer, where he’ll soon celebrate his 19th anniversary as an employee. “I thought my father was so wrong, but he had it right. I was just too young to appreciate it.”

Though Sowder himself doesn’t make the connection, it’s easy to draw a line from that first experience as a mentee to the afternoon of May 14, when he’ll be honored as the Healthcare Businesswoman’s Association 2015 Honorable Mentor. Over the course of his career, Sowder hasn’t just occasionally sat down with less experienced office mates or chewed the ears of trusted colleagues; he has elevated mentoring to a prominent place in both his professional life and the lives of the people he has mentored, who themselves have mentored many others. You’ve heard of the Bill Walsh NFL coaching tree, which counts Mike Holmgren, Andy Reid and Steve Mariucci as its next-generation disciples? Well, Sowder has built a mentor/mentee network of equal eminence within pharma.

“Stuart knows that effective mentorship is hard work and he has never shied away from it. He genuinely recognizes the value of mentorship in building and sustaining a high-performing organization,” says Pfizer chief medical officer and EVP Dr. Freda Lewis-Hall.

From his first day at his first job, Sowder made it a point to seek out colleagues he believed could help him grow personally

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### Stuart Sowder

*VP, external medical communications, Pfizer*

#### July 2005–Dec. 2005

*Sr. director/group leader, managed market regional medical research specialists, Pfizer*

#### Sept. 2002–June 2005

*Sr. director/group leader, regional medical research specialists, Pfizer*

and professionally. “My boss at the Veterans Administration in New York was a real dynamo. She was the first person I encountered who was really the full package, in terms of managing a team and getting a job done,” he recalls. “I mean, of course you’re going to try to learn from somebody like that.”

In the process, Sowder honed the skills it takes to succeed as both mentor and mentee. “You need to be a good listener and you need to be selfless. You need to give it the time that’s needed,” he says of mentoring. “Most people have the capacity to do that. It’s just a matter of mining it.” The mentee, on the other hand, must “honestly disclose what’s working and what’s not. You have to make yourself vulnerable.”

Indeed, what distinguishes Sowder from any number of self-appointed master mentors is that he formalizes the process in a way that demands commitment from all individuals involved. He tries to keep “four or so” mentors and mentees active at any given time. He defines “active” as “meeting at least once monthly for at least an hour.” And while he still checks in with his VA boss on a semiregular basis, Sowder believes that most mentor/mentee relationships have a natural expiration date. “Any good experience I can impart on a person will come out in a 12- to 18-month time frame.”

Similarly, the benefits a mentee can derive usually emerge in a comparable time frame—though one of Sowder’s best experiences, and one that lengthened his professional arc at Pfizer, played out with more urgency. “I’d developed this field-based medical team and was really nailing what I was doing. So when my boss’s boss came to me and said, ‘We’d like you to consider taking this job in medical information,’ which is what I’m doing now, I kind of laughed—like ‘Why the heck would I give this up?’” he recalls. But when Sowder discussed the opportunity with three of his mentors, each of them said, in essence, it’s time for you to go. “They all thought I was a little too comfortable. I took their advice and it was the best [career] decision I’ve made at Pfizer.”

So while Sowder is incredibly flattered by the HBA award—“I can’t imagine being honored for something more exciting and personally fulfilling”—it’s a safe bet that receiving it will not change the way he approaches the mentoring process. “I really enjoy it and I’ve benefited greatly from it. Mentorship is a gift. It really is.” —Larry Dobrow

