

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PRECEPTORS

Regardless of the field, effective clinical preceptors share common traits. We surveyed our recent graduates, asking them to name the three most important characteristics in preceptors. If you think back to your favorite preceptor/s in your internship experience, chances are you would list many of the same traits. Below we've listed the effective traits noted by our graduates, the medical and allied health literature, and ADA workshops. The traits are not necessarily listed in order of importance as most of the lists were ordered differently – probably because they are all very important.

An effective preceptor:

1. [allows hands-on experience](#). This is a really difficult one for some preceptors. However, interns cannot internalize the role of RD if they are not allowed to practice it. Consistently, this is the trait most often listed as desirable by dietetic interns, as well as medical and allied health students. Conversely, only being allowed to observe is often listed as the biggest frustration of supervised practice experiences. You will see when you reach the section on teaching skills that most experiences begin with observation, but those that go no further do not provide an optimal learning experience. It takes confidence in the intern as well as confidence in your own ability to allow an intern to actually perform tasks when a mistake could be made.
2. [welcomes interns and is prepared and ready to precept](#). This trait covers a lot of territory. It involves preparation on the preceptor's part. How many of you remember arriving at a rotation to find that the RD 'forgot' you were coming and was in a quandary as to what to 'do with you'? Not a good feeling for the intern – and probably not a good feeling for the preceptor. This trait also includes being 'down-to-earth', available, and attentive. While an effective preceptor is all of those things, they also must maintain a professional demeanor and remember that the preceptor-intern relationship is inherently a senior person-junior person relationship. So, the effective preceptor makes the intern feel that they are ready and willing to precept them, but does so in a manner that encourages critical thinking and independence.
3. [remembers what it is like to be an intern](#). One of the most intimidating situations to be in as an intern is having a preceptor assume you know much more than you do. Remember what it is like to have a lot of information 'thrown' at you and to forget that you know that information until you have a chance to use it.

4. [is patient, supportive, and encouraging](#). This trait extends the second trait, primarily by adding the element of encouragement. This is especially pertinent to interns' questions. A preceptor that encourages questions is providing an environment where the intern can comfortably make sure they are 'getting it' by asking questions. At the same time, preceptors with this trait are perceived as patient and supportive because of their encouraging attitude. It's hard to be encouraging without also being patient and supportive. On the other hand, the preceptor who asks intimidating questions (or acts superior or intimidating) is not encouraging questions from the intern. Remember that being under a high level of stress is detrimental to learning. An effective preceptor will minimize the intern's stress by being patient, encouraging, and supportive but will also have high expectations.
5. [is knowledgeable, confident, and enthusiastic about continuing their own learning](#). Preceptors who are knowledgeable and confident in their knowledge and skills provide an excellent professional role model for interns. Especially those preceptors whose knowledge goes beyond nutrition and exhibits a broader understanding of the disease process. Such preceptors are most likely to be a valued member of the healthcare team – a fact often mentioned by interns when they talk about rotations they enjoyed. Similarly, such preceptors often exhibit a desire to continue their learning. In the survey of our graduates, having preceptors assign research articles that furthered the intern's knowledge for a rotation was often mentioned as an extremely positive experience. Given the ever-changing nature of dietetics, enthusiasm for continued learning is essential and provides an excellent role model for the intern.
6. [is energetic and enthusiastic about dietetics as a career](#). We all know how discouraging people who are unsatisfied with their jobs can be. Preceptors' satisfaction with their positions and dietetics is often mentioned by interns – in both good and bad ways. It's disheartening for an intern close to the end of their training to have a preceptor tell them what a bad career choice they have made. And, sometimes those negative attitudes do not even have to be voiced – negative attitudes have a way of 'rubbing off'. Fortunately, most RDs are quite enthusiastic about both the field of dietetics and their particular position. If you are unhappy with your choice of dietetics or with your position, you will be a more effective preceptor if you do not share that information with the intern and try to be careful that you are not conveying a negative attitude.
7. [models good organization and time management](#). Interns are usually extremely busy and it is particularly helpful to them to see RDs who have developed good skills in this area. Preceptors who explain to the intern

how they prioritize their workload and make room for unexpected tasks were seen as being helpful in the interns' developing these skills.

8. [has high expectations of the intern](#). Again, this is mentioned often – generally when the preceptor has not had high expectations. Interns like to be challenged and to feel like they have learned as much as they can from an experience. High expectation leads to high performance. High expectations are not limited by performance expectations but should extend to expectations about 1) completing assignments on time, 2) dressing appropriately, 3) not exceeding break time, etc. Remember that professional conduct extends past actual performance.
9. [has integrity and respect for all people and demonstrates professional ethics](#). This trait was not listed as often as might be expected. Hopefully, because it is a trait shared by the vast majority of preceptors and, as such, is a 'given'.

As you are preparing to precept, it might be helpful for you to think back to your internship experience. Remember those experiences where you felt you learned the most and you will probably realize that those preceptors had most, if not all, of the traits we have listed. It might be helpful to take the time to think about those experiences and list the traits you found helped you the most in becoming a professional – then to consciously try to incorporate those traits into your precepting style.