A mentor’s perspective

Making mentoring useful in practice

ERC Widening webinar

Alessandra Sciutti · ERC mentor



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Why I bring several perspectives



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APPLICANT	**ERC Starting Grant PI and two ERC Proof of Concept grants**
EVALUATOR	ERC referee, Synergy evaluator and Starting Grant interview simulations
SUPERVISOR	More than 30 graduate and PhD students supervised + additional mentoring activities
RESEARCHER	Leading a multidisciplinary cognitive robotics and human-robot interaction team

… and several **rejected proposals**

What applicants often need most

Usually, the science is already strong.

The challenge is making its excellence visible to a reader who does not share every assumption.

“What do you want the evaluator to remember?”

01	**A clear core idea**	What is genuinely new, and why does it matter now?
02	**A credible path**	Can ambition and feasibility coexist in the same proposal?
03	**A readable story**	Can an intelligent non-specialist follow the argument?

RELATIONSHIP

The mentor as a sparring partner

The proposal stays with the applicant.

01

Tell

Explain the idea, even before it is fully polished.

02

Test

Notice what lands, what confuses, and what prompts questions.

03

Reframe

Find a clearer way to express the same scientific ambition.

The value comes from honest intellectual resistance in a safe conversation.

How I approach the mentoring process

1	**Listen**	The project in the applicant's own words
2	**Question**	Excellence, logic, feasibility and risk
3	**Mirror**	What I understood and what remains unclear
4	**Retest**	A revised narrative in the applicant's voice

Questions I return to

EXCELLENCE	**What changes** if this project succeeds?
NECESSITY	Why does this question need to be addressed **now**? And why **you**?
FEASIBILITY	What evidence makes the ambitious plan **credible**?
RISK	Which **uncertainty** is productive, and how will it be managed?
CLARITY	What must a **non-specialist** understand on the first reading?

What tends to improve

Before the interaction	After focused mentoring
Many important ideas compete for attention	One central contribution organizes the proposal
Expert assumptions remain implicit	Key assumptions become visible to the reader
Ambition and feasibility feel disconnected	The work plan supports the scientific promise
The applicant explains the project	**The applicant makes a persuasive intellectual case**

BOUNDARY

Ownership stays with the applicant

Mentor contribution

- Listen as an informed outsider
- Ask uncomfortable general questions
- Reflect how the story is received
- Share relevant personal experience

Applicant responsibility

- Choose the scientific direction
- Decide which feedback is useful
- Write in an authentic voice
- Defend every claim and decision

Good mentoring strengthens agency

How applicants can make mentoring useful

01 **Bring the difficult parts**

Use the session for doubts, trade-offs and unresolved choices.

02 **Explain before defending**

Let the mentor show you how the message was received.

03 **Ask for reactions**

Questions often reveal more than proposed wording.

04 **Keep a decision log**

Record what you changed, declined and still need to test.

05 **Retell the story**

Check that the revised proposal still sounds like you.

Use mentoring to see your proposal through another mind, then make your own decisions.