

Mentoring: Are We Doing It Right?

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Abstract

Most clinicians and researchers will acknowledge the importance of mentoring in their respective fields but whether what is done is truly mentoring is presumed rather than explicit. This paper explores the nature and importance of mentorship in the development of a junior faculty member, and the qualities of a good mentor and mentee. It emphasises the multi-faceted complexity of this relationship including its potential problems, and its inevitable termination. This ending might be unexpected, premature and traumatic; or it may be planned when the mentee has developed a certain level of maturity and independence of thinking and judgment. Either situation requires working through this feeling of loss.

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“As a physician, we accept the fact that we are lifelong students of the practice of medicine. We should also embrace the teaching and sharing of others as part of the journey. The special skills and experience we develop in a particular area of medicine, patient education, or patient management become all the more valuable when shared with less experienced colleagues. Plus it is exciting and fun to share expertise and watch colleagues grow. Unfortunately, the realisation that mentoring is both a source of personal satisfaction and a professional obligation often does not arrive until we have gray hair (just as interest in family reunions may not grow until we ourselves are the ones telling the stories). When we return from a CME course, we usually bring back a ‘pearl’ to help colleagues improve their medical skills. It may be more valuable to offer personal pearls frequently in the form of emotional support or assisting in patient care. Such daily mentoring has the potential to improve our profession as well as satisfy our personal connection to our profession and colleagues.”

PA Setness,¹

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Introduction

In his book *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (based on a 10-year study on adult male development),² David Levinson, a psychologist in Yale, wrote that a crucial task of early

adulthood is finding a mentor, and upon reaching middle-age being a mentor is one of life's major satisfactions and fulfills one of the psychological needs of mid-life.³

Mentoring does seem to have a profound effect on subsequent success in various professions. In business, there is an association between strong mentoring relationships and positive career outcomes such as higher earning power at a younger age, and greater career satisfaction.⁴

The same applies to science. Harriet Zuckerman's study⁵ of 92 Nobel laureates found that more than half – 48 of them – had worked as students, post-doctoral fellows or junior colleagues of older Nobel laureates. The relationship between the mentors and the future Nobel laureates were not just about the transmission of knowledge and skills but also a “style of thinking” – of a sense of the significant, or important problems to solve. Later, as mentors themselves, these scientists tend to “transmit” these values and attitudes to their mentees.

The lack of mentoring could also have a possible detrimental effect on junior faculty. A survey among gastroenterology research fellows found that the lack of research mentorship was cited by those fellows as one of the reasons why they would not train in their institution.⁶

There are various and varied definitions of mentorship but there are some commonality in all these definitions.

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To start with, it is not supervision which “implies critical watching and directing without the warmth that is implied in mentoring”.⁷ Other defining characteristics of mentorship include protection, sponsorship, guidance and a personal and interactive long-term relationship where the goals are professional development and achievement and personal growth.

This dyad relationship that is essentially that of an apprentice and master is highly complex and has different phases. The progression from one to the next depends on the successful resolution of the previous stage. There is an initiation stage – the initiator can be either someone seeking a mentor or a person choosing someone to mentor – followed by a mentee stage, a break-up stage, and finally, if the relationship is successful, a stage of lasting friendship.⁸

In an ideal situation, there would be mutual benefits. In addition to the satisfaction of helping a younger colleague realise his or her potential and getting the recognition for doing so, the mentor may also learn and receive support from the mentee which will help his or her own professional development.⁹

For the mentee, the benefits include: (i) Help with socialisation into the profession¹⁰ such as helping the mentee to know the “rules of the game” so that the mentee behaves appropriately in different situations, linking up with important contacts, advise on which conferences to attend, and exposure to others inside and outside the institution; (ii) Help cope with stresses along the way and reduction of unnecessary risks that might threaten the mentee’s reputation (protection)¹¹ and focus by ensuring that the mentee is not laden with tasks that may distract him from the chosen path; and (iii) Help with the planning of the subsequent career path,^{12,13} – being notified of any training or promotion opportunities,¹⁴ receiving challenging and stimulating tasks, getting that advice and help in negotiating academic politics, and advocating for the mentee.

Other than these career functions, the mentor would also enhance other psychosocial functions.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This includes serving as a role model of the appropriate attitudes, values and behaviours for the mentee, building up the mentee’s sense of competence, self-esteem and professional identity through a trusting and supportive relationship which would include providing a forum in which the mentee is encouraged to talk openly about his or her ideas, anxieties and fears.

Tyre¹⁸ suggests that there are 3 basic tasks that a mentor should carry out. The first is to “inspire” by recognising and encouraging the realisation of the mentee’s potential. The second is to “support” and instill a sense of belonging. The third is to “invest” through the demonstration of trust by empowering the mentee.

Qualities of a Good Mentor

The choice of a mentor should be made with some care. Mentees need the right mentor for the various stages of their development and interests.¹⁹ Ferris and Pincus²⁰ elicited the views of mental health investigators on the qualities of a good mentor and these desired characteristics included skill, talent, knowledge, competence, respect among peers, genuine interest in the welfare and accomplishment of others, generosity, an enduring capacity for empathy, patience, enthusiasm, availability, integrity, high moral and ethical standards, time, energy and being “not too competitive”.²⁰

Choosing a mentor may also include the consideration of the stage at which this potential mentor is at in his or her own career trajectory. A person’s own career which is just taking off would probably be more concerned about building his or her career, personal accomplishments and advancement, and therefore be less willing or skilled and experienced in providing good mentoring. In this aspect, age may be a consideration. Levinson² has suggested that a mentor should be ideally 8 to 15 years older than the mentee – old enough to represent greater wisdom, authority and experience, but not too old to be “in the image of the wise old man or distant father”, although age might not be as important as the profound and inherent desire to mentor. For those who are younger, it may be a matter of learning mentoring skills rather than being too focused on their own careers, which with time, they will have the skills to mentor.

Barr and colleagues²¹ enumerated a list of questions that would help protégés select a mentor (Table 1). While possessing both depth and breadth of that particular domain expertise is important, the mentor must have the necessary interpersonal skills and generosity to impart that knowledge, and the confidence to admit ignorance and to work with a mentee to address these gaps of knowledge, or make arrangements to seek help from someone else. This self-assurance would also be needed to enable them to share their own experiences and past mistakes about their professional lives, and in doing so, they will gain the trust of the mentees and give them “a valuable gift of professional inclusion”.⁹

Qualities of a Good Mentee

The tasks a mentee would have to undertake parallel the stages of the mentor- stages. To initiate mentee relationship and acquire the skills required for each of these relationships, the mentee must be proactive and seek to attract a high quality mentor by showing interest and involvement in the projects of the mentor. Mentors are also attracted to highly driven mentees who have demonstrated competence and ability. In the business world, Turban and Dougherty²² identified certain key personality traits in attracting mentors

Table 1. Questions to help a Mentee decide on a Mentor

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- What is the achievement record of the mentor in a variety of areas?
 - How has the mentor determined his or her standard of excellence and are these standards high?
 - Is the mentor respected as a key player in various networks throughout the department, nationally and internationally?
 - Does the mentor have enough faith in the protégé to provide wholehearted support?
 - Does the mentor understand my needs and goals, both personal and professional?
 - Is the mentor perceptive and honest enough to recognise when he or she cannot provide the protégé with the information needed? If the latter is the case, will the mentor help the protégé find someone who will provide the missing elements?
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Barr LL, Shaffer K, Valley K, Hillman BJ. Mentoring: applications for the practice of radiology. *Invest Radiol* 1993;28:71-5.

including “an internal locus of control, high self-monitoring (sensitivity to social cues), and high emotional stability”.

Once this initiation has been successfully achieved, they must now assume the mutual responsibility of maintaining it. They will have to be cognisant of certain expectations within this relationship – key among these would be a commitment to mutually agreed-upon objectives, devotion of the necessary time and energy to these objectives, a willingness to learn under the mentor's supervision, and an expectation that the mentee must become increasingly independent with time.²³

The mentee must be willing to accept this unequal relationship with an authority figure and accord the necessary respect to his or her mentor – part of this respect is the recognition that the mentor is investing his or her time and energy.⁹ Mentees must be prepared to work hard and perform their assigned tasks and be able to communicate their needs to their mentors.¹⁹

Mentees' behaviours that maintain the mentoring relationship include the following: being “teachable” that is, being able to accept and value fair and honest feedback even if they are less than complimentary. On the other hand, they must also be able to challenge the mentors intellectually where appropriate although too much challenge can be disruptive and irritating.²³ Obsequiousness, on the other hand, would be boring and irritating.

Like any other relationship, there will be the occasional “hiccups”: a mentor may not perceive some of the difficulties faced by the mentee and see it as a lack of commitment and application. The mentee may feel stressed and

misunderstood by the mentor, but it is in such situations, that the mentee must be able to communicate clearly and face these conflicts in a mature and open way.

Mentees should – where possible and appropriate – work towards helping the mentors in their work such as in the collection of data. Olian et al²⁴ have shown that mentors were more willing to engage in the mentoring process when they anticipated more rewards for themselves, which in turn led to better performance of the mentees.

Potential Problems

This relationship may at times be fraught with difficulties and pitfalls. The problem may sometimes be in the mentor who lacks the requisite skills and/or the personal characteristics. Murray²⁵ has listed some of these including not taking the role seriously, not giving sufficient time to work with the mentees, possessiveness of mentees, being too protective and curtailing the protégés' needs to take the risks necessary for learning, and being resentful of mentees. A mentor might take on too many mentees – diluting the mentoring influence or may have shown favouritism.²¹

The mentee who has a good and nurturing relationship with a powerful mentor may become an object of envy and target of resentment and jealousy from his or her peers. He or she must also be able to cope with this rivalry and the conflicts engendering from such situations.²⁶⁻²⁸

The development of the mentor-mentee relationship will deepen with time and while a stronger bond will be forged, there will be the attendant risk of boundaries being blurred or crossed, for example, the relationship developing into a sexual liaison.

Dudley²⁹ reports in his survey of post-doctoral fellows that some of the difficulties that these fellows faced were issues of data ownership and gaining dependence from the mentor's area of research.

Termination

The mentor-mentee relationship will in time come to an end. This may be planned or unplanned.⁹ The latter might be due to an unfortunate situation such as when the mentor falls seriously ill or dies. This is likely to be traumatic at various levels and invoke intense reactions – common of which are “numbness, feelings of abandonment, anger, depression and disbelief”.⁹ This unexpected loss is also likely to have a significant professional impact in that the mentee loses a resource, a sponsor and protector who would have otherwise helped chart and navigate his professional career for several years to come.⁹

The desired termination would be where it is planned and it comes about because the mentee has attained that level of maturity and acquired that independence of thinking

and judgment. This will be the point when the mentee begin to separate intellectually and emotionally from the mentor, and “divide the territory” of their work together.²³ Both mentee and mentor must recognise when this point is reached and work together – including resolving the feelings of loss – to make that transition to a relationship of a colleague, collaborator and friend.

Future Directions

Other than the numerous anecdotal accounts of the benefits of mentoring, there are also various quantitative and qualitative studies of doctors that have validated the benefits of mentoring including the reduction of work stress,³⁰ being better prepared for appraisals and assessments,³¹ and fostering personal, professional and academic development.³² In the local medical context, mentoring is more often than not, an informal and implicit rather than a formal and explicit arrangement. Moving forward, there is perhaps a need to put in structures for the mentoring of doctors.³³ This would include the identifying and rewarding of good mentors while providing a framework for the development, support of these mentors, and an articulated code of ethics and guidelines for mentors.

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