



# Ethical mentorship: the dilemma of success or failure

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**Abstract** Mentorship has enhanced many careers, and it can be important in both job satisfaction and enjoyment; however, mentorships are complex human relationships and, as such, can be successful or can fail to be successful. This contribution explores some of the factors that facilitate both the success or failure of ethical mentorship relationships in medicine.

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## Case

Joe Newbe was a young dermatologist who established a private practice in a large city and joined the local dermatology society. When the society offered a mentorship program to all recently established dermatologists, Dr. Newbe was quick to sign up. The society suggested that each mentee choose someone in the area to act as his mentor, and Joe thought that a smart pick would be the president of the organization, who might then be helpful in promoting his practice in the community. The president happened to be Meg Oldhand, who was the chief of the academic group in the city. Meg was ambivalent regarding mentoring, inasmuch as she was very busy with a recent expansion in her program and a new research interest. She reluctantly agreed. They worked to find a time to get together and finally settled on Meg's academic afternoon, which did not coincide with any of Joe's time off. Joe was not happy with this time period selection, because he would have preferred to spend this time building his practice. Joe's goal was to get to know the community, but Meg felt this was less important than her interest in discussing papers on volunteer activities in the community and establishing clinical trials in the private practice setting. It was not long before Joe and Meg each found reasons to cancel and reschedule their meetings; moreover, even when they did meet, Joe was unprepared and had not read the papers that Meg had recommended. Meg thought Joe was lazy, because

he did not read the papers she had suggested and because he had a scheduled day off a week. Conversely, Joe thought Meg was unreasonable in her request that he "misallocate" his available practice time. Finally, they agreed on one thing: ending this unfortunate relationship.

## Introduction

Mentorship is an entity that comes in many forms and styles and, therefore, is difficult to define. Throughout physicians' careers, there are many who are influential unintentionally or even accidentally. Others have a very short influence window without any formal agreement. These valuable experiences contrast with what can be termed intentional monitoring<sup>1</sup> or formal mentoring where a mentor and mentee come together to work toward a specific, defined goal. This contribution focuses on another form of mentorship: the intentional mentoring experience. This type of mentorship is an association between two people focused specifically on career development. There is typically the implication that the senior member of this pair's goal is to guide the younger member to enhance the younger member's career; however, it is important that this relationship demonstrate reciprocity<sup>2</sup> and that the senior member be open to his or her own learning and advancement, or the relationship may become formulaic or even pontifical. There is evidence, at least in the business world, that people are happier in their work and are promoted more rapidly if they have been mentored.<sup>3</sup>

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Mentorship is hard work, and there are many elements required for successful mentorship and innumerable opportunities for failure. Success is not guaranteed by a mere absence or failure. Close examination of components that make a successful mentoring relationship will uncover many of the hidden pitfalls that can sabotage a mentorship relationship. There is a triangular model of mentor competence that includes abilities (emotional and communicative), competencies (skills), and virtues (such as integrity).<sup>2</sup> There has been a tendency to put most of the responsibility for success on the mentor, but the mentee or protégé has an important role in the success of the relationship and must strive toward the acquisition or deployment of these skills to achieve a successful outcome.

This contribution considers the process as a whole, with particular attention to the hidden ethical pitfalls. Some key components of the experience are shared values, expectations, goals, and boundaries that will determine the success or failure of the process for both the mentor and mentee.

## Decision to participate

The first, and possibly the most important component in the success or failure of mentoring, is “Do both partners want to be involved in mentorship?” Although mentorship involves learnable skills and traits, not everyone is interested in the process or in acquiring the skills.<sup>4</sup> Entering into this relationship without enthusiasm and commitment by either party almost certainly dooms it to failure.

The mentor must decide three things: Do I want to do this? Do I have the skills to do this? And, do I have the time? Frequently, there is an immediate wish to commit to the process. Yet, it is important to recognize that there must be two committed people to effect a successful mentorship. If either is not ready and engaged, the experience will be a failure for both. And the mentor must realize that this is not a process about one’s self but rather about the mentee. Skills discussed in this paper are important for success. Time itself may be the rate-limiting factor. If the mentor does not want to mentor AT THIS TIME, then he or she should stop right there. Many want to mentor, but the timing must be right. Is the mentor already mentoring and will the addition of another mentee represent excess commitment or a conflict of interest (will you promote one mentee over another)? Where is the mentor in his or her work/life journey? A serious illness in a family member may make it impossible to exert full effort in the process. Be honest with yourself. Can you as the mentor give what is needed to another NOW? If the answer is no, it may not be no forever.

The same self-evaluation is true for the mentee. There is evidence that mentorship can help a career develop with greater success, more rapidly, and/or with greater satisfaction. It has become urban legend that a successful career depends on a successful mentorship and so people may

approach mentorship as something to be “checked off.”<sup>5</sup> Are you ready for the commitment of mentorship? What will get in your way? Do you have the emotional readiness? Are you seeking true change and growth? Do you have, or are you willing to, make the time? This must be a committed relationship and not a passive process.

The heart may be willing, but there must be time to devote to this work. This is usually more of an issue for the mentor who may have already committed to other mentees or have a major project under way. Realistically, there will not be time. Of course, the mentee may have time obstacles as well, such as moonlighting, child rearing, or other professional development activities. If one member of the team starts missing appointments or stops completing assignments, the other may become angry, frustrated, or withdrawn. Time is critical and openness about completing commitments is imperative throughout a mentorship relationship.

## Skills

Too often the most important mentorship criterion is thought to be success in the mentor’s field. The assumption is that this success is enough to mentor successfully in a formal relationship. Success in any aspect of a career does not guarantee other qualities to guide others to success. There are other attributes and skills that are critical. Although these skills seem intuitive, they are not. They include confidentiality, trustworthiness, acceptance and respect for others, strong listening skills, time management (which allows the mentor to both be available and keep in touch), emotional intelligence (which includes self-awareness and self-control as well as awareness of the emotional makeup of others), role modeling, and the ability to keep learning about the mentoring process. The ethics of trust and respect are essential to the success of this kind of relationship inasmuch as certain boundaries cannot be crossed.

Mutual trust between the mentorship parties is paramount. Trust is required at multiple levels. The mentor must treat information as confidential. Nothing will destroy trust more quickly than the mentee hearing that a confidence has been betrayed and that some information has leaked out to others. It will be the end of all sharing between the pair and would be considered an ethical infraction that would destroy the relationship. If some piece of information needs to be shared outside the relationship, the mentor must be completely honest and disclose to the mentee that this will happen. Examples might be when the mentee identifies someone who has been unethical in patient care or research. The mentee must believe and trust that the mentor is acting in his or her ethical best interest or else it will be impossible to have the difficult conversations that revolve around real evaluation. There can be no half-way in the arena of trust. The trust must be bidirectional. The mentee cannot reveal things that the mentor has disclosed in confidence,

especially experiences that the mentor shares (self-disclosure) as a part of the relationship.

The mentor must be willing to accept and embrace diversity, whether racial, gender, religious, political, or intellectual diversity. The first four types of diversity are relatively easy for the mentor to recognize. Harder to recognize and even accept are the personality and work-style differences that may get in the way of a successful mentoring relationship. For example, does the mentor like to think through problems alone, while the mentee finds satisfaction and discovery in debate, with there being joy in both the battle and the outcome? And if there is diversity in style, will it enrich the relationship or destroy it?

Listening may be the major key to successful mentoring. Mentors and mentees both considered listening the most important mentor skill.<sup>6</sup> Can you listen or do you need to talk? A mentor cannot know what the mentee is looking for in a relationship if he or she does not listen. A mentor cannot expect the mentee to mature if the mentor makes all the decisions and just “gives the answer.” As the mentor, one must listen and guide the conversation so that the mentee finds his or her way, not the mentor’s way. This is the mentee’s career, and the mentee seeks guidance. It is not an opportunity for the mentor to re-live his or her career, yet again. Mentors must listen to the mentee’s spoken and unspoken needs, listen to his or her problems and the suggested solutions, and then guide the mentee to his or her chosen path. If a mentor is unwilling to listen or to learn to listen, the mentorship experiences will not be as successful, and the mentor will learn nothing to enrich his or her own career. In addition, the mentor will ethically fail in the ultimate mission, which is to help and enhance the career of the mentee.

Time management is a skill that all professionals need but few endeavor to develop it into a well-honed skill. Without time management, the mentor and mentee may find it difficult to be available and keep in touch, let alone complete assignments. It is crucial to arrange meeting times and then observe those times. Of course, occasionally something may come up for either party to prevent a meeting and flexibility is required. If more than 25% of meetings are canceled, there is a problem that needs to be discussed openly and resolved. The mentor has the responsibility as the leader of the relationship to be aware of keeping in touch and have the emotional maturity to recognize his or her part in missed meetings. Too many “skips” may signal a lack of commitment, a loss of shared values, an indication of a mismatch, a loss of trust, and so forth. It is a mandatory indication for a reevaluation of the relationship. A corollary of this component is availability. This does not mean that if the mentee has a problem the mentor must drop everything and be there instantaneously. It does mean that the mentor should find time for a meeting in a timely fashion. If emergencies become the norm rather than the exception, it will be important for the mentor to address this with the mentee, and help the

mentee with time management, identification of true emergencies, and emotional maturity.

Emotional intelligence has come to have significant meaning in the leadership world.<sup>7,8</sup> Does one know how one reacts to stress, how one is perceived by others, the nature of one’s strengths and weaknesses, how one likes to manage situations, and whether there are any potentially fatal flaws? Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills are components of emotional intelligence at work.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that self-awareness is the first of these skills. Depth of self-knowledge is hard to obtain, and those who respond that they know all about themselves are probably deluding themselves; however, it is crucial that mentors explore these issues. If one is a decisive person who is bothered by indecision, simple recognition of the perils of mentoring someone who is indecisive is vital to the success of the relationship. A decisive person may still be able to mentor an indecisive mentee; however, the awareness of these personality differences will be the key to the success of such a mentoring relationship. Self-control is a part of emotional intelligence and it is important that a mentor always exercise this trait with his or her mentee. Anger, frustration, and annoyance will damage a relationship that depends on openness and trust. If a mentor expresses anger at a problem identified by the mentee, or at the solution suggested by the mentee, the mentor is damaging the relationship such that the mentee will be unlikely to consult the mentor with difficult problems. If need be, the mentor should step away and reengage when he or she has calmed down.

A corollary to emotional intelligence is role modeling. One must always be aware of the example he or she is setting. Parents who insist on seat belts for their children, but refuse to buckle up themselves, cannot expect this value to be internalized by their children. Similarly, the mentor cannot break the rules or even appear to break the rules. If a mentor wants the mentee to value volunteerism, the mentor must volunteer. If a mentor wants the mentee to be on time, the mentor must be prompt. If the mentor hates excuses, the mentor should not make excuses. Mentors must let their actions in all things reflect their values.

There are other skills and attributes that are essential to the success of a mentoring relationship. Affirmation as both a person and a professional is critical to the mentee’s development of confidence. This cannot be created by false praise inasmuch as false praise will, in the long run, compromise trust and performance. Emotional support involves both warmth and acceptance. This must be tempered with constructive criticism. If criticism is destructive or harsh, it may damage rather than build a career. Self-disclosure must be authentic, not self-aggrandizing.

The full array of skills required to successfully mentor another is somewhat daunting, and it is doubtful that any one person possesses every skill at a mastery level. Mentors must commit to improving these skills over time. This may be a formal commitment represented by enrollment in

courses, an informal commitment represented by self-study, or even simple self-reflection; however, skill improvement is as important to mentoring as it is in medical practice, leadership, or sports. One will not improve mentoring skills absent commitment and practice.

## Stages of mentorship

Mentorship has distinct phases and recognition of these phases is integral to success.<sup>9-11</sup> (pp126-30) It is important to move through the initiating steps before tackling the bulk of the relationship. Similarly, it is equally important to plan for closure of the mentoring process before either ending or electing to continue an enduring relationship. These steps include the following:

Beginning or initiation phase:

Choosing a mentor;

Evaluating the fit, including boundaries, confidentiality, and dual roles;

Formalizing the mutual goals and expectations.

Body of the relationship phase:

Mentoring

Review and evaluation phase;

Plan for change and closure phase;

Change or close the relationship.

## Beginning phase

Choosing a mentor is a crucial component of mentorship. Assigning mentors randomly, or taking into consideration the desires of only one of the parties puts the relationship at risk from the very beginning; however, having the agreement and commitment of both parties may be very important to see the pair through any rough times that develop during the process of mentorship. Shared values are one of the keys to successful mentorship. There are many examples of this, and such values include compensation, commitment to job or family, time commitments, work ethic, promotion issues, and so forth. It is not that both must agree on every value enumerated, but shared core values will be important to the success of any mentoring relationship. On occasion, it may be that core values are not aligned and that significant differences surface over time. It will be important for both parties to be sure that diversity recognition supplants the advantages of shared core values for the relationship to still be viable.

Once the pairing choice has been made, it is time to explore the relationship, set boundaries (both practical and ethical), and discuss confidentiality. Time must be taken to get to know each other, and be sure this relationship will work. Is there something that is prohibited from discussion? Are both parties committed to confidentiality? All material issues are metaphorical two-way streets. The mentee has as much responsibility to protect confidential information as

does the mentor. Honest, open discussion requires respect and the expectation that information will not be used to judge or demean the countervailing party. If home life, marital status, and so forth is deemed to be out of bounds, this decision must be respected. It may be reviewed later, but unless there is a mutually agreed status change, proscribed material must remain out of bounds. It is at such a juncture that a real commitment to the mentorship is made. If, conversely, the relationship is deemed impaired, this may be the appropriate time to terminate the mentorship. After exploration, if either side feels uncomfortable or feels that this pairing will not produce a positive outcome, then the relationship should be ended. If there is any feeling that the other party is dishonorable, untrustworthy, or incapable of sharing core values, the relationship should be ended and a new mentor engaged.

This is also the time to formalize the goals of the relationship. The mentee should have a clear idea of immediate career goals amenable to the mentor's assistance. Many mentees cannot articulate goals well, and it will be important for the mentor to listen carefully and be sure to guide the mentee to reasonable goals. Initial goals do not need to constitute the entire mentorship relationship. New issues will arise, the relationship may change so that many issues become available for discussion, and friendship usually develops. Without a map and a destination, no one will ever know if they have arrived. If the mentor has no discernible goals for the relationship, there may be problems, such as early disengagement, loss of interest, or even boredom. The mentor's goal may be as simple as career building of another, although to prevent mentor "burnout," he or she should look for other tangibles or intangibles that make the relationship rewarding. This juncture is also the time to establish an early timetable. Is this a 3-month, 6-month, or 1-year mentorship relationship? It should be clear what both mentorship parties are expecting as to the approximate duration of the relationship.

## Mentoring or body of the relationship

The bulk of the relationship is spent on mentoring itself. This time may involve tasks such as reading and discussing literature, reviewing papers, honing speaking skills, or dealing with daily problems and/or leadership issues. In most instances, the process is a combination of many components, leading to a total career development. Most mentors will quickly see how the mentee grows and handles challenges, as the mentee works through problems and issues.

## Review and evaluation

The process of review and evaluation should be continuous throughout the mentorship. As the relationship

develops, review and evaluation will be part of the process to ascertain where the mentee has succeeded and where improvement is possible. Ideally, defensiveness plays no role in this process nor does unnecessary critical attacks. Constructive criticism and talking through better ways of handling situations are the keys to success. It is also useful to occasionally evaluate where the mentorship is going and whether there is need for modification. Ideally, parties should evaluate each other and the relationship itself.

## Ending

Mentorship that has no defined conclusion dooms both parties to a stagnant relationship or, ultimately, to a power struggle. The mentorship relationship most often develops into mutual friendship and deep respect. It moves away from one party being senior and the other being junior, and moves toward a relationship of equals. The end of mentorship need not represent an end to the relationship. Ideally, it is a redefinition of a new relationship. Both parties need to accept, if not embrace, this reality. The most common problem is for the mentor to continue to view the mentee as subordinate. Although this may help maintain the ego of the mentor, it does not benefit the mentee. As with child rearing, the goal for the mentor should be to get the mentee to a position where the mentor is no longer needed. Metaphorically, the mentor must kick the mentee out of the nest and watch him or her soar.

## Miscellaneous pitfalls

Jealousy will damage any relationship. Whether it is jealousy regarding success, lifestyle, productivity, ideas, or the car one drives, if jealousy enters the mentoring relationship, the relationship is doomed.

Occasionally, a romantic interest develops. It may be unilateral or mutual. If the mentor has an attraction to the mentee, it can lead to exploitation or harassment.<sup>12</sup> If either unilateral or bilateral romance ensues, the mentorship must be terminated. There is no basis for any romantic relationship when one person holds a position of authority over the other. The relationship would now be construed as potentially unhealthy and unethical. It is the mentor's responsibility to recognize such eventualities and take action, but the mentee has the responsibility to bring this to the forefront if the mentor remains passive. If the other cannot approach either of the pair, a senior person needs to become involved. This might occur at the request of either the mentee or the mentor.

Abuse of power or position should also put an immediate end to any mentoring relationship. Negative abuse of power is more easily recognized and may involve holding the mentee back or subtle career sabotage. Rarely, a mentor will promote a mentee beyond what is reasonable. All mentors help to forward the careers of their mentees, but occasionally

there may be inappropriate promotion to positions for which the mentee is unqualified. This could damage the career of either or both and would qualify as an ethical conflict of interest.

Mentorship is not counseling or psychotherapy. Neither partner should expect this type of relationship to deal with depression, delusions, or marital problems. Entry into counseling or psychotherapy effectively ends an ethical mentorship relationship and is inappropriate, no matter what the training of either partner. It constitutes stepping out of the boundaries of mentorship, and should be avoided at all costs. The appropriate action is to get professional help for the mentee and either continue the mentorship within appropriate boundaries, or suspend the relationship until it can be resumed with goals as originally outlined.

## Case review

In reviewing the initial case presentation, there were multiple items that interfered with a successful mentoring relationship. Joe entered the mentorship being very excited to have a mentor. Meg was unsure if this was the right time and entered the relationship with some hesitation. Their core values were very different. Joe valued a growing practice and by extension directs patient care. Meg was a committed researcher, and she valued research and volunteerism. Meg did not listen to what Joe wanted and instead tried to push her agenda and possibly her lifestyle. As the relationship went forward, they both withdrew, and respect diminished. Meg, as the mentor, needed to bring these issues to the forefront and discuss them openly. When she did not, Joe should have addressed his concerns. It would seem that both Meg and Joe had not truly agreed on the topics and time frames for the mentorship. Each would have benefited from having a mentorship relationship with someone who shared core values. Neither party had the self-awareness to recognize the fatal flaws with this pairing. Their differences became a problem rather than an opportunity. They made the right decision to terminate the relationship.

It is hoped that one failed mentorship will not lead both parties to shy away from the experience in the future. It can be the pairing or timing that is wrong, not the experience itself.

## Conclusions

Mentorship itself is a complex relationship that requires mentorship skills, time, and bilateral commitment to be successful. Shared values are key to respect and trust and are the basis of an ethical relationship. Mutual growth and the potential development of friendship make the termination of the mentoring relationship simply the beginning of a new relationship. Those who have been mentored are more likely to mentor others. In the end, mentorship can foster an

exponential growth in job satisfaction, productivity, and commitment to the medical specialty and community. A successful medical mentorship may represent a benefit for the parties as well as the community at large.<sup>13</sup>

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