

Review article

Practical Tips for Mentoring: Making a positive difference in the lives of others

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Abstract

Strong mentor-mentee relationships have been shown to be beneficial to both personal and professional growth of the mentee, and rewarding and satisfying to the mentor. As the value of mentorship becomes increasingly recognized in the workplace, it is important for professionals to appreciate and develop the qualities of effective mentors.

Keywords: Mentoring, mentorship, mentor, mentee.

Introduction

The process of becoming a healthcare professional is complex. Professionals must first acquire knowledge and develop requisite skills through study and experiential learning. Professional expertise then comes through further practice and constant feedback. Along the way, specialization and exploring options within the profession are often key steps in one's career path. All of these steps may benefit or be accelerated when combined with a mentoring relationship with a senior colleague.

Mentoring may be defined as a “*dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé)*”¹. Given this definition, mentoring is more than teaching, coaching, advising, sponsoring, or supervising. While there may be some elements of all of these types of roles included in mentoring, the relationship between a mentor and mentee is much richer and runs much deeper.

Many different models of mentoring exist^{2,3}. These include the traditional dyad, peer-to-peer, group, and distance models. Each model may have its distinct characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. However, the concepts and goals of the mentoring relationship are similar between all of these models, including the important roles and characteristics of effective mentors and ideal mentees.

This paper will provide an introduction and overview of the qualities of effective mentors, the important role of the mentee, and other advice for creating and maintaining strong mentor-mentee relationships.

What are the benefits of effective mentoring?

There are a number of perceived benefits of mentoring. These include higher professional satisfaction, facilitating career opportunities, increasing research productivity, providing social support and coaching, greater rates of professional development, lower attrition rates, and increased networking.

Mentors themselves also can receive great reward and benefit from the mentoring relationship. Mentors often report high levels of satisfaction and pride in making a positive impact on their mentees' personal and professional lives⁴. They also benefit from intellectual stimulation, exposure to new ideas and fresh perspectives, and developing meaningful long-term relationships.

What are the qualities of outstanding mentors?

A mentor can be defined as “*a trusted counselor guiding the professional development of an individual.*”⁵ While contextual differences exist, outstanding mentors share some similar qualities. The best mentors are fully invested in the success of their mentees. In this pursuit, they encourage, provide feedback, role-model, coach, motivate, inspire, guide, and advise. The best mentors also help mentees understand and navigate the culture, traditions, networks, and opportunities within their respective organizations or professions. Role modeling by the mentor can help the mentee identify and grow towards the professional or personal attributes they wish to emulate.

Mentoring is more a mindset than a skillset. Strong mentoring is driven by altruism, commitment, and a sense of “paying it forward”⁶. Mentors demonstrate integrity, honesty, and insight. They are active listeners and are able to figure out how to best communicate and guide their particular mentee. They are trustworthy, and also willing to extend their trust to the mentee. They tend to remain calm and poised and provide emotional stability and objectivity even when the mentee’s situation may seem difficult and tumultuous.

Mentors maintain the right balance between respecting the autonomy of the mentee, but also providing guidance and advice. Mentors help mentees avoid problems and decisions that might damage professional relationships or self-sabotage their own careers.

While some might think a mentor is a teacher who assigns tasks and reviews performance, a mentor is really much more than a teacher. A mentor also facilitates personal and professional growth in an individual by freely sharing their own professional wisdom and life experiences with the intent of fostering the mentees growth.

It is important to note that senior status in an organization alone is not sufficient to ensure the proper requisite skills and attitudes to serve as an effective mentor. Mentor status can sometimes be abused, and used for self-gain, power, and control by the senior individual. Mentees should be on the lookout for warning signs of disingenuous individuals who may mask their true intent behind the promise of mentoring.

The important role of mentees

The mentee also plays a critical role in the mentor-mentee relationship. A mentee is seen as the future of an organization or profession. They are being provided opportunities to excel, grow, and develop skills that will help them be successful now and in the future. Just as a mentor is more than a teacher, a mentee is much more than just a student. A mentee plays a much more active role than a typical student, and proactively engages their mentor and positively reinforces the benefit of their relationship.

Good mentees demonstrate a number of important qualities and habits⁷. They are willing to self-assess themselves honestly. They are receptive to feedback, and take initiative to request feedback and advice from their mentor. They are proactive in their relationship with their mentor, and demonstrate appreciation for their relationship. They prepare well for their meetings and conversations with their mentors, and realize that their mentor needs to find their relationship gratifying. Good mentees also accept the fact that their mentors are not perfect. They can accept their mentors as fellow human beings, but see the great value they provide to their own growth.

Good mentees are also aware of the need and value of seeking out mentoring, and are proactive in doing so. They realize that an open and honest dialogue is an important step in developing a strong mentor-mentee relationship. They are willing to extend their trust to the mentor, even sharing their mistakes and insecurities that mentors can help them reflect on and move forward from.

Making the connection: How do we find our mentors?

Mentors and mentees need to find each other. Mentor-mentee relationships are “special”, and require mutual compatibility that can only be discovered with time. We should avoid trying to “assign” someone to be another person’s mentor. We can assign supervisors to supervisees. We can assign teachers to students. We can assign coaches to those that need development. However, we must allow mentors and mentees to find each other.

While mentees have the responsibility to find their own mentors, it is also important for their institutions to provide them with early guidance, education, and institutional support⁸. Institutional commitment and formally recognizing and valuing mentoring within institutional practices and culture may also improve the success rate of mentoring relationships.

Many endorse the idea that establishing a network of multiple mentors is advantageous over relying on a single individual as a mentor. Each of these mentors may have particular areas of strength or experience.

In some cases, the mentor-mentee relationship may increase in benefit if attention is given to factors such as gender identification, underrepresented status, or other individualized characteristics^{1,9}.

The natural history of the mentoring relationship

Like any meaningful relationship, mentoring relationships grow and evolve over time. The initial phase of the relationship is one that requires establishing trust, ground rules, mutually-shared expectations, boundaries, and shared goals. In some cases, these important foundational cornerstones are not achieved, and the mentorship relationship may never fully mature. For those

that successfully navigate this initial phase, there is then the potential for a mutually-rewarding experience that will continuously grow and flourish over time. This too takes great effort on the part of both the mentor and mentee, and goes beyond merely scheduling periodic meetings. At some point, it is healthy that the mentoring relationship may come to a natural close. Hopefully, this final phase includes reflection, discussion, expressions of gratitude, and a sense of full closure on a meaningful relationship.

The future of mentoring

As with many elements of work and home life, technology and new social norms have greatly influenced current and future practices. Peer-to-peer mentoring and social networking are opening up new and promising methods of establishing and maintaining mentoring relationships⁶. Video conferencing has made long-distance mentoring relationships much more convenient and feasible, and widely expanded the options for finding and establishing effective mentor-mentee relationships.

As mentoring becomes increasingly recognized as a learnable skillset, additional opportunities for training mentors will become available. Some of these programs have already shown to result in improvement of mentoring skills and self-perception of mentoring abilities¹⁰.

Conclusions

In summary, strong mentor-mentee relationships have been shown to be beneficial to both personal and professional growth of the mentee and rewarding and satisfying to the mentor. As the value of mentorship becomes increasingly recognized in the workplace, it is important for professionals to appreciate and develop the qualities of effective mentors and proactive mentees.

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