

On mentoring.

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Professor Oreopoulos' speech in the ceremony of his nomination as honorary MD of Medical School of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is one of the most important activities of members of a medical school staff; thereby they help a new generation of physicians to develop both as physicians and as persons and help them to live out their dreams¹.

HISTORICAL REVIEW/ORIGIN OF THE TERM

When Odysseus left Ithaca to go and fight at Troy, he entrusted the care of his newly born son, Telemachus, to his old friend, Mentor. The dictionary defines a mentor as «A trusted counsellor, guide, a loyal advisor or coach». A mentor usually is an older more experienced individual, who helps and guides a younger individual's development. As I will mention later, this guidance is never done for personal gain¹⁻⁴.

According to mythology, Mentor is also a personification of Athena - Goddess of wisdom, justice, civilization and war, suggesting that good mentors, escape their limits and advise their students as wise counselors with many years of experience.

Thus the ancient figure of Mentor/Athena becomes a powerful model for university teachers, who should never forget that their primary obligations are to their students' intellectual growth and to the institution where they work. In his wisdom, the older Mentor was supposed to draw forth the full potential of Telemachus, thus helping him to grow in wisdom, without rebellion⁴.

To achieve this, a good Mentor should be a good listener, always available, patient, flexible, supportive, respectful and respected.

CHARACTERISTICS ROLES OF A GOOD MENTOR

The important roles of a successful mentor are: teacher, sponsor, advisor/counsellor, agent, role model, coach, confidant^{5,6}.

1. Teacher

As teacher, the mentor teaches the technical skills of his field, guides the fellow how to reason and how to study in an efficient manner, how to write scientific articles, how to go successfully through the publication process, apply for grants, review articles etc.

The ultimate goal of such teachings is the formation of character. As M. J. Tobin said in his excellent article⁶ a teacher affects eternity because he can never tell when his influence will stop. When I help a fellow, one of my expectations is that s/he in turn will help others.

2. Sponsor

As a sponsor, the mentor introduces his/her fellow to important individuals in the field.

3. Advisor/Counselor

As an advisor/counselor, the mentor is a sounding board to help the fellow refine ideas and clarify thoughts. The mentor does not try to solve the fellow's problems but helps him to become self reliant. In these circumstances the mentor's greatest contribution is in listening and saying little. Mentoring is different than parenting because the mentor, while providing compliments also points out the weaknesses. When criticizing, however the mentor focuses on behavior not

the person, and always with great tact. By holding up a mirror the mentor enables the fellow to see how his character develops.

4. Agent

As an agent, the fellow should know that his mentor will go to battle for him. However, he will do this after the fellow has made a convincing attempt. Spoon-feeding stunts growth.

5. Role Model

A mentor is always seen as a role model. The fellow wants to emulate his mentor's approach to academic life. Usually, young individuals select as mentors individuals, who have attitudes and behavior they want to develop in themselves. Values are not learned by being preached, but from seeing them embodied and enacted in the routine of daily life. The good mentor/role model articulates his values in action, otherwise the hypocrisy that is always evident, mutes the effectiveness of any advice.

Thus the fellow observes the mentor's professional priorities, time spent in helping colleagues and patients, volunteering and his intellectual and scholarship. As a role model, a mentor is the one who with thoroughness and truth telling has the ability to make work appear as fun. The fellow sees how the Mentor interacts with people, how he exercises restraint and expresses the moral element. Humility is one of the greatest attributes of a mentor/role model⁶.

Role Models are not always Mentors

Whereas most of the time a good mentor is always a role model, not all role models are mentors. Many giants in history had no mentor, but they had role models whom they found in their readings; Einstein, received his mentoring by reading Mach, Poineau and Maxwell; Churchill, who never attended university, was influenced by studying the works of Gibbons and McAuley; Lincoln, who went to school for less than one year, was a bookworm; and more recently Nelson Mandela was hugely inspired by General Kutuzov in Tolstoy's «War and Peace»^{5,6}. In my case, I was not mentored by either Professor Gouttas or Professor Daikos but I always wanted to be like them, admiring in both their wisdom and humility.

6. Coach

A coach motivates the players to win. He knows when to offer encouragement, when to push and when to pause and take a break.

The mentor/coach sets high standards and encourages the fellows to achieve their full potential. People are not motivated by small challenges. Make no little plans, take risks, yet be realistic.

The mentor/coach conveys the sense of awe in his work and the satisfaction in serving others. Albert Schweitzer once said «I do not know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know is that the only ones among you who will be surely happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve».

This is very close to the advice my mother gave me, the last time I saw her, «My child - help others as much as you can even at your own expense».

7. Confidante

Mentoring is a two-way relationship based on trust. The mentor will win and sustain the fellow's trust through constancy, reliability and integrity.

Eventually the fellow matures and, over time, becomes an equal and the relationship evolves into a meaningful friendship, as I have been blessed with so many of my fellows.

WHY ONE SHOULD BECOME A MENTOR?

The list of virtues required of a good mentor is intimidating, taking into account that modern-day mentors are ordinary human beings who do not receive help from Goddess Athena. This prevents many qualified teachers from becoming mentors^{4,7}.

If becoming a mentor requires such a commitment of time and effort, why one should bother? For those like me who were blessed with great mentors, we want to repay this blessing. Others just want to help out, to be a positive influence, or give something back to the scientific and the wider community.

Nothing can quite match the self satisfaction of sharing your experience to help the new generation of colleagues. It seems more important now than ever before, to preserve those bonds that grow out of sharing relationships within the profession, to help our patients and perhaps put some fun back in medicine⁸. What could be more satisfying than to help a col-

league become a better doctor? Furthermore, those whom you help as you go up the academic ladder are the same persons you will meet as you go down⁴.

Preservation of the human aspects of medicine, as it moves towards an industrial outlook seems an uphill battle, and thus does not seem to provide an atmosphere for mentoring and for helping colleagues to be the best they can be⁸.

We should embrace teaching and sharing with others as part of the journey. The special skills and experiences we develop in a particular area of medicine become all the more valuable when shared with less experienced colleagues.

The realization that mentoring is both a source of personal satisfaction and a professional obligation unfortunately does not arrive until we have grey hair.

Frequent comments of people approached for mentoring are: «I do not know how to be a mentor», «I need a mentor myself», «How can I serve as a mentor after all the mistakes I have made» etc.⁷.

In fact having been a faculty member over the years and the experience you have gained along the way makes you well equipped to be a mentor. The only requirement is a genuine interest and a willingness to help guide another individual⁷.

None of us is or needs to be perfect. Furthermore it is important for the fellows to see that we do mistakes, have uncertainties as we encounter difficulties, but still we overcome them and thrive.

REWARDS OF MENTORING FOR MENTORS

There are rewards. Mentoring always helps the mentor's personal growth and also provides many chances for learning. Furthermore the mentoring and the interaction with younger physicians is a two way street. Older physicians can learn a lot from younger physicians. It improves performance and one's interpersonal skills and provides an opportunity for introspection^{4,5}.

Furthermore a mentor gets more done by involving bright young people in their projects than in working alone. The mentor also benefits from the glory of his fellows. This interaction with young people liberates forces of youthful energy within the mentor who thus becomes rejuvenated.

Finally by communicating the most important values of his profession to the new generation, the mentor satisfies his Hippocratic obligation by passing knowledge on to the next generation, while at the same time satisfying his desire to repay a debt⁸.

MENTORING PROGRAMS

While for some of us, having mentors and mentoring has come as a natural evolution, not everyone can find a mentor. Realizing the importance of mentors, many universities in Canada and the USA are now developing mentoring programs to help young faculty members to plan their careers with the advice of more experienced colleagues⁹.

Their goals are to:

- Facilitate mentor-mentee pairs.
- To organize occasions for discussion of common problems and finally.
- To develop workshops to help mentors.

The purpose of the program is to assist and encourage junior faculty members to develop successful personal and professional careers.

Such programs not only help attract and maintain the best, improve faculty morale and avoid the sense of isolation among minority groups.

In these pairs, the younger partner is expected to take considerable responsibility for making the relationship work⁹.

FINDING A MENTOR

In the absence of a mentoring program I would advise all the fellows and even students to try and find a mentor. Look at your place of work. Is there any individual whom you admire and respect? Someone who has always impressed you with their insight and perceptiveness⁴.

Make sure your mentor will be at least one-half to one generation older, usually someone who has gotten rid of the early envy, animosities and petty vanity, enabling them to be a more understanding mentor.

Look for enthusiasm - do they believe that their work is the most exciting area in the world? Look for commitment, common sense, competency, good judgment, maturity, self confident, vision⁶.

Be however careful to avoid bad mentors - those who are selfish with their time, who want all the glory (they do not have enough satisfaction in seeing their fellows shine) and may even envy the attention his fellows attract and many even exploit the fellows as their technicians. Finally what is worse, a bad mentor may try to mold his fellows in his own image, rather than fostering individuality and independence.

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