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Involved or Committed? Similarities and Differences in Advising and Mentoring in the Academic and Business World

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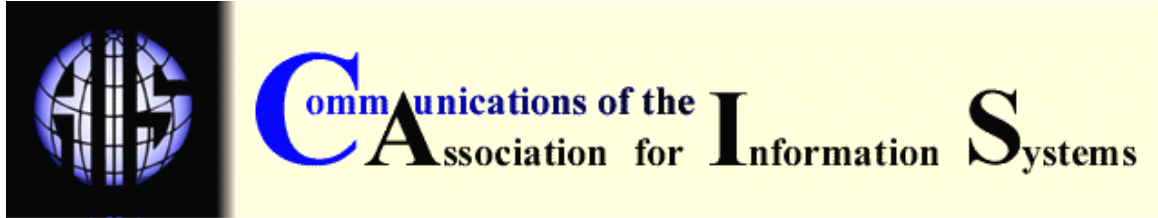# INVOLVED OR COMMITTED? SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN ADVISING AND MENTORING IN THE ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Ever since Odysseus, King of Ithaca, left to fight in the Trojan War and entrusted his friend, Mentor, to care for and educate his son, academic mentors have guided, educated, trained, and encouraged protégés in their academic development. As with Mentor and his protégé, mentoring relationships evolve over time in a predictable pattern and certain behaviors are necessary to initiate and sustain a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship. There are numerous parallels between successful mentoring behaviors in the academic and business world, and this paper seeks to leverage those similarities to provide advice for academic mentors and their protégés. This paper describes the stages of a mentoring relationship, discusses behaviors that underlie each stage and presents a series of best practices that future academic mentors and protégés should seek to emulate. While specific activities vary by stage of the mentoring evolution, mentors and protégés should create successful relationships, be respectful of time expectations and demands, ensure that necessary advisement occurs, and be open to an increasingly deep and personal relationship. By understanding and applying these behaviors, academic mentors and protégés can learn from and extend the mentoring legacy of Gary Dickson.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1986, Rick Watson, then a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota, was working with Dr. Gary Dickson on Rick's doctoral dissertation. Watson reflected on that time during a 2006 tribute to Dickson and wrote:

> *I think the incident that best conveys the essence of your character is when I completed the first draft of my dissertation. You read it within days and gave me valuable feedback. At my dissertation defense, the committee requested that I write an additional chapter. I duly wrote this chapter and passed it on to you for review. By the next morning you had read the chapter and given me comments to handle. You demonstrated to me by your actions your total commitment to your students, a trait that I and many admire. You were never a bottleneck to dissertation progress, and I have tried to emulate your commitment. I admire you for your scholarship and your accomplishments, but above all I admire you for your wholehearted commitment to your students. I thank you personally, and thank you on behalf of all your students.*

Mentoring is defined as a "nurturing process in which a more skilled or experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person" [Anderson and Shannon 1988]. Mentors abound in business (Freddie Laker mentored Richard Branson), politics (Aristotle mentored Alexander the Great), entertainment (Mel Gibson mentored Heath Ledger) and sports (Eddy Merckx, five-time Tour de France winner, mentored Lance Armstrong, seven-time Tour de France winner) [Wikipedia 2006]. Most highly productive and successful scholars have benefited from mentoring by senior scholars [Ford, Duncan et al. 2006].

In a broad sense, a mentor is a person who takes a special interest in the professional and personal development of another and, within the realm of science and engineering, a good mentor seeks to optimize a student's educational experience, assist in socialization into the discipline's culture and help the student find suitable employment [NAS 1997]. Academic mentors can benefit from the relationship and achieve higher career and personal satisfaction, attract good students to the university, develop their personal network and extend their contribution past retirement. Business mentors report on-the-job performance benefits, higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment and reduced burnout and turnover [NAS 1997; Eby and McManus 2006].

Business and academic mentoring share a common evolutionary process and this synchronicity allows insight into best practice strategies within the academic environment. This paper examines mentoring under this rubric and offers practical suggestions to guide academic dyads toward successful mentoring. There are several evolutionary paths that mentors and protégés can take (see Figure 1), and the remainder of this paper describes these paths.
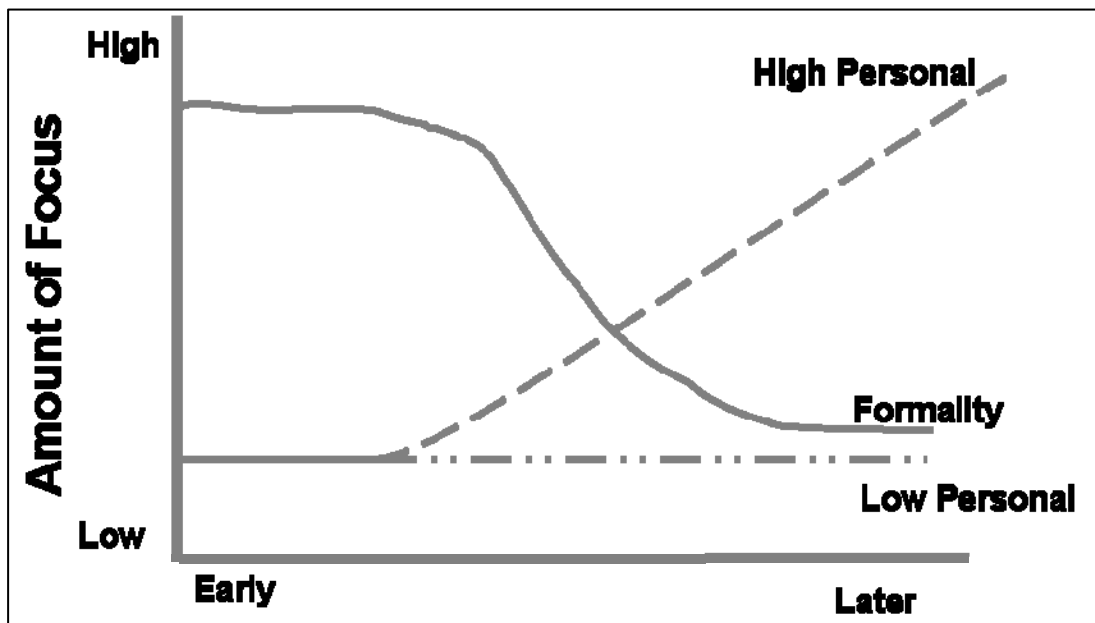

Figure 1. Evolution of Mentoring Relationships

II. THE HIERARCHICAL YEARS

The process for a young professional joining a firm is similar to a Ph.D. hopeful enrolling in a new university. The potential employee is generally attracted to either the firm as a whole or to specific

individuals within the firm, interviews with a number of people and, if the interviews are successful, accepts a job. Generally the new professional is assigned to work with the initial contact within the company. The same process exists in academe, and so it is helpful to examine how businesses integrate new professionals into their firms.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) has one of the best-known mentoring programs within the consulting industry [Underwood 2001], and its strategy for integrating new consultants is through the formal assignment of the new person, regardless of level, to a more senior consultant who is responsible for the new employee's initial orientation and coaching. A similar strategy exists at Gartner Consulting where a new consultant is assigned a "buddy" who is responsible for the initial orientation and socialization, and a "coach" who is responsible for formal guidance and coaching. In both cases, there may or may not be a preexisting relationship between the new employee and the advisor but there is a distinct hierarchical structure.

The same process exists for new Information Systems (IS) Ph.D. students and the faculty. In the case of Watson, he was initially attracted to the University of Minnesota based on its international reputation and the quality of its faculty rather than a preexisting relationship with any faculty member. Upon arriving in Minnesota, Watson met and was guided by several senior faculty members. As in the business world, Watson's initial relationship with faculty was strictly hierarchical and focused on identifying appropriate course work for an IS Ph.D.

In both business and academe, the initial relationship is formal, hierarchically based, tactically focused and could best be described as advisory or directive rather than mentoring. An advisor, while valuable, is different from a mentor since ". . . mentoring is a personal, as well as professional relation. An advisor might or might not be a mentor, depending upon the quality of the relationship. A mentoring relationship develops over an extended period, during which a student's needs and the very nature of the relationship tend to change" [NAS 1997, page 1]. One Gartner consultant describes the difference between advisors and mentors by comparing the role of a pig and a chicken in the development of breakfast. The chicken is involved in the development of breakfast by contributing eggs to the meal while the pig is committed to the breakfast through its contribution of the bacon. In academics, an advisor is involved with the development of a Ph.D. student, while a mentor is committed to the Ph.D. student. This suggests that it is important to understand the nature of the role between the student and the advisor.

- Best Practice 1 – Understand that the initial relationship between the student and the faculty member is advisory-focused and be careful not to encumber the relationship with unreasonable personal expectations.

The hierarchical relationship generally lasts between three and four years, and during this time, the faculty advisor helps the student select classes, informs the student about performance expectations, guides the student in research topics and suggests conferences for initial submissions. The advisor also gives the student honest feedback on performance so that the student can develop as a scholar. The business advisor plays a similar role to a new employee and assists that person in understanding the corporate culture, getting appropriate work supplies, completing required forms, getting placed on an initial project and guiding the new professional through recurring yearly actions (e.g., performance appraisals). In both cases, this relationship is tactical and is designed to enable the employee to quickly become productive. While the advisor role lacks the emotional cachet of mentoring, it is important preconditioning for successful mentoring.

During this period, advising often works well when the advisor and student have many interactions, as this gives the advisor and student multiple opportunities to experience incidents that prompt advisement. For example, Dickson managed the annual AACSB Summer Institute at the University of Minnesota with assistance from doctoral students. By offering an intensive program in IS, the Institute addressed the then drastic shortage of professors who could teach IS skills. The frequent interaction between Dickson and the doctoral students resulted in many tidbits on teaching and interacting with academics. For example, in a passing episode, Dickson stressed

to Watson the importance of gender-neutral writing and asserted that the awkwardness of his/her could always be avoided by skillful writing. This stricture is something that Watson has conveyed to his students, including carefully editing this article for compliance. Incidentally, the mentor might forget passing on these dollops of wisdom, but the eager student will accumulate them.

- Best Practice 2 – Both the student and faculty member need to respect the value and the timing of academic advising.

Some relationships remain purely advisory-focused while others evolve a personal component into a mentoring relationship. The evolving personal relationship can supplement or replace the professional relationship. If the advisor and protégé have few common academic interests, the relationship stabilizes at the point where the student and faculty member are friendly professional colleagues. If the student and faculty member have common academic and personal viewpoints, the association is likely to develop into a mentoring relationship. The size and cultural norms of the university can also influence this dynamic.

The same dynamic is seen in the business world. In many cases, the new professional works in an area different from the advisor's expertise. For example, the person could decide to specialize in a client vertical market (such as government) instead of a technical capacity, like the advisor, and so the strength of the relationship may diminish. If the employee and the advisor remain in the same area, the relationship can remain strictly advisory or may shift to a mentoring relationship.

- Best Practice 3 – An advisory relationship that diminishes over time is not a sign of ill health but may be part of a natural separating phenomenon when paths diverge. The development of a mentoring relationship typically results from a strong multidimensional personal connection between the mentor and protégé.

The personal connection is founded on common interests, and, in addition, respect, trust, understanding and empathy underlie a good mentoring relationship [NAS 1997], and these characteristics are particularly important during the early stages of the affiliation. A new professional is uncertain of the rules and unwritten protocols within the new company, and if the mentor does not respect the protégé, the protégé may be vulnerable to opportunistic behavior by the mentor [Eby and McManus 2006]. A similar risk exists within academe where a new student can be guided by a senior faculty member in a way that benefits the faculty member but is detrimental to the student. Fortunately most academic mentors respect doctoral students and clearly understand their role in a student's development.

Although it is rarely discussed, it is important for the protégé to be respectful of the mentor. Within the business domain, mentors will try to help protégés by giving them insight in the thinking of senior management; however, protégés can sometimes use this information inappropriately and cause embarrassment to the mentor. Given the fierce competition for promotion within the business domain, a mentor who is embarrassed by a protégé often suffers. Fortunately, this rarely occurs within an academic setting where collaboration is a highly prized attribute of scholars, and there is a close camaraderie among senior academics.

- Best Practice 4 – Mutual respect underlies a successful mentor/protégé relationship.

One of the most demanding aspects of the early mentoring years is understanding the time requirement for successful mentoring, and there appear to be two distinct groups of Ph.D. students and business professionals on this attribute. The first group is constantly in the mentor's office to solicit advice and discuss actions and activities, while the second group rarely contacts the mentor. Is it the role of the mentor to effectively interact with protégés within both groups? For the first group, the mentor has to be sure that the student develops as an independent scholar and does not become totally dependent on the mentor for all decisions. This does not mean frequent interactions are detrimental, quite the contrary as interactions are an opportunity to exchange tacit knowledge, but these interactions need to be genuine mentoring activities rather than avoidance of independent judgment. For the second group, the mentor has to continually

reach out to the reluctant protégé to encourage interaction. In the hurly burly of daily academic life and high time scarcity, this can often be neglected by the overly busy professor.

A mentor should mirror the amount of effort and energy that the protégé puts in the relationship and so the protégé is ultimately responsible for the intensity of the mentoring interactions. For example, when Watson was preparing his additional dissertation chapter, Dickson mirrored Watson's involvement in the relationship by quickly commenting on the new chapter and this demonstrated a smoothly functioning and fairly intense mentor/protégé relationship.

- Best Practice 5 – Mentors should reflect the amount of effort that the protégé puts into the relationship but ultimately the protégé determines the frequency of the interaction.

Once the student is close to completion of the dissertation, the mentor and protégé are most comfortable allowing the relationship to begin to shift from a distinctly hierarchical relationship to a junior/senior partnership, which starts to break down hierarchical distance between the mentor and protégé.

III. THE JUNIOR/SENIOR COLLEAGUE YEARS

The junior/senior colleague years occur after the early hierarchical years and reflect a transitional period when the protégé has become fully oriented and the relationship with the mentor evolves to be based on the idiosyncratic goals, personalities and desires of the dyad. Within the business domain, the protégé has worked on several projects, had several successes and now has specific needs relative to development goals. If the employee and the coach have an advising-based role that is purely professional, this time period may involve a pulling away by the protégé as that person seeks to establish a distinctive identity in the business community.

A similar dynamic takes place within the academic environment when the student is close to completing his dissertation and is focused on finding a job. Both the mentor and protégé are comfortable closing the hierarchical difference in the relationship and the student has obtained a level of professional credibility, presented papers at conferences, submitted to journals and is moving to a first academic job.

So what is the role of a mentor during the junior/senior colleague years? This time period involves a resetting of expectations on both the part of the mentor and the protégé. Since the mentor no longer has a supervisory relationship with the protégé, the relationship can (and should) change to suit the unique needs of the mentor and protégé.

For example, the dyad might work collectively on a project. Dickson had an idea for a conference and ensuing book to explore the relationship between IS and the future of the enterprise [Dickson and DeSanctis 2001]. Many of his former students were invited to contribute chapters along with other scholars. This was a clear signal that the former protégés were now part of Dickson's network of scholars.

Some faculty members see their involvement with a student as limited to the student's residence at the university and, when the student graduates, the mentoring lapses as the protégé becomes a professor. Other faculty members enjoy an ongoing relationship with their former students and frequently collaborate with them on topics. Ultimately the relationship will be unique to the dyad, and the changes should be clear to both participants to avoid misconceptions, missed expectations, and hurt feelings.

- Best Practice 6 – It is important to clarify mentoring expectations after the student graduates to ensure a common understanding of the nature of the relationship.

The junior/senior time is a good time for the new Ph.D. to expand the personal circle of professional colleagues, and the mentor can provide invaluable support by introducing the protégé to senior scholars at other universities. These introductions can provide the protégé with research opportunities, job possibilities, and deeper immersion into the IS academic community.

The mentor also benefits from these introductions since it further cements the mentor's position and stature in the IS research community.

- Best Practice 7 – Senior mentors can use their personal network and connections to aid their protégés.

Introductions highlight the growing nonexclusivity of the mentoring relationship. While in the previous stage, the protégé may have taken advice from several faculty members, in this stage, the protégé grows a broader circle of professionals for collaborative purposes and the mentor and protégé need to accept that the protégé will be working with other co-authors. Most mentors are comfortable with the nonexclusivity. In the case of Watson, a few months after graduating he had started working with a marketing scholar, Leyland Pitt, and they have now co-authored more than 50 articles and conference papers. These collaborations did not diminish his relationship with Dickson but they enabled Watson to grow his personal network of co-authors and led to future publishing opportunities.

There are some correlations within the business community. Once an employee has gained a measure of professional respect inside the company, he is challenged to differentiate himself from his mentor in order to develop his reputation. The protégé can do this by developing non-overlapping complementary skills to those of the mentor. For example, the protégé can leverage the mentor's technical skills by seeking a new client vertical market and so can become distinct from the mentor while simultaneously maintaining a relationship.

- Best Practice 8 – Protégés need to expand their circle wider than the mentor, and this healthy activity professionally differentiates the mentor and the protégé.

There is one aspect that sharply differentiates business and academic mentoring. It is a natural feature of academic mentoring that the student takes a position at another university. Given the collaborative nature of academic life, this transition usually has minimal impact on the relationship. In the business environment, the outcome is often quite different if the protégé leaves the mentor's company to join another firm. If the new firm is not a competitor to the mentor's firm, the mentoring relationship can continue, although it is shaped by very different forces. However, if the protégé joins a competitor, it effectively drives an unrecoverable wedge between the mentor and the protégé because they will often be competing for the same work. The mentor may feel betrayed by the protégé, and this can terminate the relationship.

IV. THE TRUSTED SAGE YEARS

The final stage of the mentoring relationship involves an elimination of the hierarchical boundaries in which the mentor becomes a trusted sage and long-standing friend for the protégé. Many of the early scholars in the IS field have achieved this stature with their protégés, and many of the protégés have already established successful mentoring relationships with their own protégés. This is a common feature within mentoring when the protégé, recognizing the mentoring received, tries to repay the mentor by being a mentor to new IS Ph.D. students. This is a healthy renewal of the mentoring cycle, and new mentors need to ensure that they develop mentoring relationships that are unique and beneficial to their protégés instead of merely replicating the mentor's experience as a protégé.

The same counsel holds for protégés. The business disciplines tend to attract Ph.D. students with prior professional business experience who previously had professional mentors, and this offers some advantages. If the new student is self-aware and understands the attributes needed in a mentor, the student can quickly identify and successfully work with an academic mentor with the similar attributes. However, all mentoring relationships are unique to the dyad and both the mentor and the protégé need to ensure that the relationship is appropriate.

- Best Practice 9 – New mentor/protégé dyads should learn from prior mentoring relationships but be careful not to try to precisely replicate them.

V. CONCLUSION

Mentors play a key role in the development and ultimate success of new scholars in the IS discipline. Table 1 summarizes the best practice suggestions for mentors and protégés in each phase of mentor/protégé relationship.

The IS discipline is at a unique point in its development. While the discipline is younger than many of its business school peers, it is mature enough to have several senior scholars who have successfully mentored a cadre of protégés and now many of these former protégés are now mentors themselves. The health and vitality of the IS discipline depends on the continuous grooming and development of future generations of scholars. For the IS discipline to thrive, mentors and protégés should follow the best practice suggestions contained in this article and continue to learn and apply lessons from the business domain.

Table 1. Summary of Best Practice Suggestions

Stage	Best Practice Mentor Activities	Best Practice Protégé Activities
Hierarchical Years	• Provide needed and timely advice • Mirror protégé's efforts • Create appropriate boundaries and role expectations	• Respect different mentor roles • Respect appropriate boundaries and role expectations
Junior/Senior Colleague Years	• Jointly clarify mentoring expectations • Leverage personal and professional network	• Jointly clarify mentoring expectations • Take appropriate advantage of the mentor's network • Develop reputation outside of the mentor's network
Trusted Sage Years	• Maintain existing protégé relationships and build new ones	• Leverage knowledge gained as a protégé and apply as a mentor

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