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Learning from mentors ... and the reverse

BY MATTHEW D. PUTNAM, MD

My first “semi-good” paper led to my mentor who guided me over four years as I built a computer model of learning.

At the start, this idea was at least a “stretch goal” and the situation for which mentors are made. We can’t control the arrival of our hare-brained ideas; assigned mentors may come to us too early or too late. We are each responsible to know when we need mentoring.

Wikipedia presents a broad picture of mentorship. The number of styles and goals presented is beyond what I’ve found useful in medicine. But within that description are four qualities I’ve found to be important: mentorship is informal (not forced), usually face-to-face, sustained and providing the mentee with greater relevant knowledge.

Here’s what I believe about mentoring:

- Every teacher is not your mentor. This is a function of time available or personality or both. That we are not mentored by all of our teachers is a good thing. We may not

enjoy them as much as we need the grade.

- Great bosses are not simultaneously mentors. Roby C. Thompson, MD, (former chair of Orthopaedics at the University of Minnesota) was the fairest and most visionary boss I ever had. But he had many commitments beyond me, so he was not my mentor in the sense I mean.
- Mentors need not be older. A colleague of any age can be a mentor, particularly in these technology-driven times, but a colleague is not necessarily a mentor. I’m appreciative of my co-researchers Joan Bechtold, PhD, and Ann VanHeest, MD. But they didn’t mentor me—nor did I mentor them.
- Although life coaches have become common, they work for you and will be financially conflicted when telling you what you need to hear. They are not mentors.
- Mentors should not ask you out to discuss your progress. They are not your romantic partners, best friends or confidants.
- Mentors should challenge you to the point of making you uncomfortable.
- Mentors must be more expert than you in the subject to be learned.

We all need mentors

It’s worth noting that even smart and famous people needed mentors. Einstein was mentored by Max Talmey beginning at age 15. Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Bill Walton both credited John Wooden as the key mentor in their lives. Had Wooden been simply a great basketball coach at UCLA, I doubt this would have been true, but his teaching was more about life than basketball.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Telemachus is guided by Mentor. That Mentor was—when not possessed by Athena, the God-

ness of Wisdom—a mostly ineffective older man seems not the point except in so far as we associate age with experience and the need for the mentor to pass on wisdom to us in times of need. What goes unsaid in the *Odyssey* is that not only must the mentor be available—the mentee must listen.

I was given the opportunity many times to become a better listener but, being open and honest, I admit that the U.S. Army improved my listening more than any other experiences or teachers. The Army teaches how to use the Johari Window, helping one to become more authentic to others and oneself. This quality of knowing and revealing yourself is seriously studied in business today as part of being emotionally intelligent, which turns out to be as important as IQ. When you combine authenticity with listening, you are in position to benefit from a mentor.

A mentor does ... what exactly?

What does a mentor actually do? Vineet Chopra, MD, and Sanjay Saint, MD, MPH, answer this question in a 2017 issue of *Harvard Business Review*. Although their article can apply to many fields, they were focused on medicine. My assessment of their findings is:

- Choose mentees and mentors carefully. Neither party benefits from lack of commitment. Unless both are fully engaged, they are wasting their time.
- Both mentors and mentees have work to do. If the mentee is to gain from being teamed with a mentor, the mentor needs to work too.
- Trainee and mentee meetings should be frequent and on time. Goals must be set and monitored. A method to reschedule meetings must be established. Frequent rescheduling indicates a need to reconsider the relationship.
- Head off disagreements or resolve them quickly. If this is not possible, terminate the mentor-to-mentee relationship and maintain a professional relationship.
- Don't treat or expect to be treated as an employee. Mentoring is not the same as

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having an apprentice. A mentee should never accept having their mentor take credit for the mentee's work. Similarly, do not be mentored into becoming the mentor's doppelgänger—that is not the point. The mentor is supposed to help the mentee find their apex—not to become the mentor's mirror.

- If you ask to be mentored, you must prepare to do the same for another in the future. I've attempted to mentor others; I hope I met many of their needs—but I have no illusion that I met them all.

Learning and commitment

I set out in college to build a machine model of learning. The chance I could have completed this work without my mentor is zero. Research related to adult learning tries to determine the best way to teach and re-prepare for any activity—even flying and surgery. Research I co-initiated in orthopedics at the University of Minnesota demonstrated that surgery case volume alone did not an expert make. Maybe this should be disheartening, but I don't think so.

Anders Ericsson, whose research Malcolm Gladwell cites in formulating his famous 10,000-hours rule in his book *Outliers*, shows that time or repetition alone does not result in improved performance. Ericsson believes that without “deliberate practice,” i.e. doing what is hard for you and measuring your success, you have no hope of improvement. This is where your mentor comes in: helping you to measure your work and then reset and/or aim as needed.

Mentors may give you a wise saying to remember. My key surgical mentor,

Robert E. Carroll, MD, told those he mentored: “Good, better, best; never let them rest, ‘til your good is better and your better best.” Pithy, but true. Carroll stressed the need to find something more than money by which to measure success. He remained involved in each of his mentee's work throughout his entire lifetime—almost to the day of his passing.

The results of mentoring

We can never know the future, we can only hope. For some, the idea of hope likely sounds foolish. Not active enough. Not a sure thing. Good or bad, that is often how mentoring is, especially as we age. The mentor cannot be sure of being there at the moment of success. No one has ever captured this sort of hope for me better than Vaclav Havel. He wrote: “Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

Each of your patients (students) who comes before you will mentor you. I admit to having been so taken with the concept of the doctor as teacher that I did not hear my patients teaching me at the beginning of my career. Fortunately, I finally caught on. I truly started to love and learn from my practice when I heard my patients speak.

That true mentors are uncommon is an understatement. If you are open to learning and assessment, you may have a few in your lifetime. Immerse yourself in each such experience. **MM**

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