Chapter 2 **What are the characteristics and behaviors of effective mentors and mentees?**

Scenarios

Pick the one that best fits your current situation:

1 *For new junior faculty*: Having just completed both your clinical and advanced research/education training, you have started your first academic job. Your department chair has asked you whether you'd be willing to be a mentor to departmental graduate students. Stop reading at this point and make two lists:

   a) In terms of characteristics and behaviors, what do you think an ideal mentor should be like?

   b) If you're going to take this on, what characteristics and behaviors would you want your mentees to have?

2 *For mid-career faculty*: You are a successful mid-career researcher/educator, and your departmental chair has asked you whether you'd be willing to be a mentor to graduate students and/or new faculty members. Stop reading at this point and make two lists:

   a) In terms of characteristics and behaviors, what do you think an ideal mentor should be like?

   b) If you're going to take this on, what characteristics and behaviors would you want your mentees to have?

3 *For new graduate students*: Having completed your clinical training, today is your first day as a graduate student in applied health research/education. The program facilitates access to a mentor, and you will meet yours in a few days. Stop reading at this point and make two lists:

   a) In terms of characteristics and behaviors, what would an ideal mentor for you be like?

   b) If you're to make the most out of this mentoring opportunity, what should your behavior be like?

4 *An alternative scenario for new junior faculty*: Having completed both your clinical and advanced research/education training, today is your first day

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as a junior faculty member. The department facilitates access to a mentor, and you will meet yours in a few days. Stop reading at this point and make two lists:

a) In terms of characteristics and behaviors, what would an ideal mentor for you be like?

b) If you're to make the most out of this mentoring opportunity, what should your behavior be like?

5 *For late-career faculty*: You've had a highly successful academic career, and wonder whether seeking any (more) mentoring at your stage would be worth the time and effort. Stop reading at this point and make two lists:

a) In terms of characteristics and behaviors, what would an ideal mentor for you be like?

b) If you're to make the most out of this mentoring opportunity, what should your behavior be like?

Highly successful academics frequently credit one or a just a few of their senior colleagues for stimulating, nurturing, and greatly accelerating their professional and personal growth and development. This chapter will summarize our current understanding of those attributes and behaviors of both mentors and mentees that are most closely associated with this academic success, and how they are expressed.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, this understanding is derived from circumstantial (moderate-quality) evidence: retrospective observations from and about successful and unsuccessful academics, cross-sectional surveys of the desires and preferences of mentees, and horror-stories of mentors' theft from and abuse of their mentees.

Effective mentors

What are the characteristics of effective mentors? A recent systematic review [1] of qualitative studies among both mentors and mentees identified several qualities of effective mentors. We have updated the search since this review was published and identified and included an additional report of the qualities that led to Lifetime Achievement in Mentorship awards at the University of California, San Francisco [2]. Summarized in Table 2.1, qualities of effective mentors are of three sorts: personal attributes, behaviors toward mentees, and professional stature.

Personal attributes of effective mentors

The personal attributes of effective mentors are those that not only allow, but enable and encourage the creation of a safe environment for the frank and

Table 2.1   Characteristics of effective mentors

Dimension	Characteristic
Personal attributes	Altruistic/generous
	Enthusiastic
	Understanding/compassionate
	Nonjudgmental
	Patient
	Honest
	Responsive
	Trustworthy
	Reliable
	Excels at active listening
	Motivating
	Self-appraising
Behaviors toward mentees	Accessible
	Works hard to develop an important relationship with the mentee
	Consistently offers help in the mentee's best interests
	Identifies the mentee's potential strengths
	Assists mentees in defining and reaching their goals
	Holds a high standard for the mentee's achievements
	Compatible with mentee's practice style, vision, and personality
Professional stature	Already successful and well-respected in their field
	Well-connected to sources of additional help

Adapted from: [1] Sambunjak D, Straus SE, Marusic A. A systematic review of qualitative research on the meaning and characteristics of mentoring in academic medicine. Gen Intern Med 2010; 25: 72–8, with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media; and [2] Cho CS, Ramanan RA, Feldman MD. Defining the ideal qualities of mentorship: A qualitative analysis of the characteristics of outstanding mentors. Am J Med 2011; 124: 453–8, with permission from Elsevier, Copyright © 2011, Elsevier.

confidential identification and exploration of all the positive and negative attitudes, hopes, fears, and experiences of mentees as they embark on academic careers.

- *Altruistic/generous*: Mentors must really like to mentor, and must be willing to devote the substantial (at times enormous) time and energy required to serve their mentees in a selfless fashion. As one former grateful mentee wrote:

  > She makes little distinction between projects on which she is or is not a co-author, or between fellows or faculty with whom she has a close or distant mentoring relationship for research. For example, she has without hesitation provided me many hours of thoughtful advice on my papers and grants from which she will receive no professional recognition or benefit [2].

  This altruistic, generous behavior also generates rewards for mentors. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there isn't a lot of evidence on the impact on mentors and it is largely qualitative. This evidence and our own experience

suggests that mentoring can repay the past debt owed to their own mentors, can provide the thrill and pride of seeing a mentee succeed, offers the enjoyment and excitement of taking partial credit for that mentee's success, can enhance the mentor's academic reputation through spotting and developing highly talented young people, and frequently develops a dependable, collaborative junior colleague [3].

- *Enthusiastic*: Effective mentors display intense, eager, and infectious enjoyment and interest in academic health care, in the pursuit and application of new knowledge that will improve it, and in life in general. One of the most important factors for mentees choosing a career in academic medicine was exposure to an enthusiastic mentor who showed passion for their job [4].

- *Understanding/compassionate*: Effective mentors understand "where their mentee is coming from," and are deeply aware of how differences in ethnicity, language, gender, and generation can create barriers to effective mentoring [5].

- *Non-judgmental*: Effective mentors avoid forcing their own ideas about "what is best" for the career paths and development of their mentees and are non-judgemental about their mentees' values, attitudes, and aspirations. Rather, they help mentees sort these out for themselves.

- *Patient*: Mentees have different learning and working styles and effective mentors are able to diagnose these and be patient with their mentee's false-starts, rethinks, and limitations.

- *Honest*: Effective mentors are truthful in offering opinions and historic examples on the merits and likely successes (and failures) of their mentees' research ideas, protocols, papers and presentations. Always supportive, and stating major negative criticisms constructively (i.e. with suggestions for improvement), in private, away from mentees' peers and superiors, effective mentors avoid glossing over errors or ignoring their mentee's unresearchable ideas, unfundable protocols, incomprehensible manuscripts, and inscrutable presentations.

- *Responsive*: Effective mentors not only encourage their mentees to raise anything for discussion (from how to handle a political issue within their clinical department to how to arrange their schedule to make sure they can pick up their children from school), but also are able to respond to them. Because effective mentoring has to serve the entire gamut of factors affecting a mentee's career development, issues may arise that call for information or expertise beyond the knowledge or competency of their mentor. An example of the former might be the special challenges associated with parental leave brought to a childless mentor; of the latter, it might be conflicts with the on-call and on-service scheduling of a clinical department brought to a non-clinical mentor. A universal

challenge for mentees is their work–life balance [6], especially in the early years when many of them are starting families, or later on when balancing the needs of aging parents. When these issues arise and are beyond their expertise, effective mentors quickly recruit knowledgeable colleagues for their expert inputs and ensure that there is transparent communication across the "newly enhanced mentorship team" around these issues. Occasionally a mentee decides to pursue research (or other scholarly activities) in a discipline that is not represented at their home institution. In this case, their effective "home-institution" mentor will help them enlist a "research mentor" at another institution while maintaining responsibility for the other elements of career development that are specific to the local policies and politics of their home base. Again, it's important that there is communication across this mentorship team to ensure there is not conflicting advice being given to the mentee.

- *Trustworthy*: Given the need for open communication, effective mentors must maintain the confidentiality of their mutual compact. Because mentees must be able to freely discuss problems with personal finances and academic advancement, their mentor should not directly control their academic appointment (mentors should be advocates here, not judges), base salary, or other substantial resources such as space or administrative support. Such controls interfere with the free and open exchange of ideas, priorities, aspirations, and criticisms.

- *Reliable*: Effective mentors keep mentoring appointments and follow through with their pledges. Accordingly, effective mentors don't take on new mentees unless they have the time to meet with them (and effective department chairs and deans don't take on more graduate students unless they also recruit the additional faculty required to mentor them!).

- *Actively listening*: In responding to their mentees, effective mentors exhibit all three steps of:
  - making sure they comprehend what their mentee is saying through both words and body language
  - making sure they retain what their mentee is communicating
  - making sure they avoid roadblocks that often interfere with communication (such as dismissing mentees' concerns or moralizing about them).

- *Motivating*: Effective mentors are role-models that *display* (not simply state!) their high motivation for academic excellence, ethical behavior, and proper professional conduct.

- *Self-appraising*: Effective mentors regularly evaluate their performance as a mentor through self-assessment and invited feedback from their mentees. Effective mentors periodically seek feedback (at least annually) about how

they are performing from their mentees, with an opportunity for a no-fault breakup if things aren't working. They must periodically evaluate their own performance, decide whether they remain the best person to mentor their mentee (and, if not, help find a more suitable mentor), and identify ways to improve their mentoring skills. As mentees progress, effective mentors also work with them on developing their own mentorship skills through role modeling and feedback.

Effective mentors' behaviors toward mentees

The foregoing personal attributes are expressed in specific behaviors toward their mentees:

- *Accessibility*, especially on short notice and for mentee emergencies; note that this doesn't have to be in-person but can be done over the phone, via Skype©, email etc.
- *Working hard to develop an important relationship with their mentee*, by working hard to make the mentor–mentee relationship a success. When differences in ethnicity, language, gender, and generation threaten the mentorship, effective mentors create safe, trusting, respectful, supporting partnerships that render these sometimes "undiscussable" issues discussable [5].
- *Consistently offering help in their mentee's best interests*, in defining and working toward their academic and personal goals. The foregoing two behaviors are expressed in the idea of mentors acting as "guides",

> . . . sensitive to the difference between a guide and somebody who forces the student into or the mentee into a particular path [who] may well offer some advice but recognize that it is only advice, it's not orders [7].

Put another way: "The most important thing is not trying to solve their problems but to help them find solutions."

- *Identifying their mentee's current and potential strengths and weaknesses*. Through both experiences with prior mentees and the exercise of their understanding, honesty, active listening, and responsiveness, effective mentees identify, label, and help mentees recognize and build upon their current and potential strengths and overcome or avoid their weaknesses.
- *Assisting their mentees in defining and reaching their goals*. Two quotes from the qualitative assessment of the nomination letters received for the mentorship award at the University of California, San Francisco provide glowing examples of the previous two behaviors [2]:

> As a mentor, [he] provided direction and opportunity, allowing me to chart my own path, but at the same time guiding me along the way.

> [He] was like a solid rocket booster, ensuring that I achieved the lift and trajectory necessary to make it into orbit. But rather than dropping off at that point, he has remained a constant feature in my life, much like mission control, monitoring my progress, offering incredibly helpful advice on a regular basis, and serving as a sounding board, editor, or strategist, depending on what I needed.

- *Holding high standards for their mentee's achievements*: Demonstrated in another quote from the University of California, San Francisco report [2]:

> [He] continues to accurately assess my skills, knowledge, and attitudes, and to challenge me to seek higher personal achievement than I would on my own. So, [he] is an outstanding mentor because he saw what I could become.

- *Compatibility with their mentee's practice styles, visions, and personalities*. Effective mentors rapidly diagnose and compare their mentees' practice styles, visions, and personalities with their own, and quickly determine their compatibility. When there is a mismatch, effective mentors arrange for a more compatible mentor to take over.*

The professional stature of effective mentors

High professional stature is a cardinal requirement before becoming an effective mentor, for four reasons. First is the achievement of sufficient academic success and respect from one's peers for the mentor to be comfortable taking a back seat in matters of authorship, grants, and recognition of their mentee's work. Indeed, effective mentors actively pursue this secondary role. As we will describe in Chapter 5, disasters occur when mentors compete with their mentees for recognition. At its worst, it leads to the theft of mentee's ideas for mentor's grants and the embezzlement of lead authorships from mentees who earned them. Tragically, such competition is common [7], and mentees should seek help from chairs or program directors when this happens. Even when mentees regain their intellectual property and due recognition, they may be scarred by the experience, often have trouble trusting colleagues thereafter, and sometimes leave town. Moreover, we've observed two nasty effects on their junior colleagues who observe this awful behaviour. Worst, when it goes unchecked they may come to regard it as standard academic behavior and start modelling it themselves. Alternatively, they may regard it as a symptom of a second-rate institution and leave town, or leave academia altogether to avoid a similar experience.

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* Note that through these actions, effective mentors also serve as role models for their mentees who (it is hoped!) will in turn become effective mentors.

The second reason why high professional stature is a prerequisite for effective mentors is their ability to call upon the networks of useful, helpful colleagues and contacts they established along the way in the academic, healthcare, research funding, and regulatory communities for the benefit of their mentees. Their ability to open doors to opportunities for social interaction, advice, electives and short-term secondments, more senior training posts, and even permanent academic posts can benefit both the quality and speed of their mentees' academic advancement.

The third reason why high professional stature is a prerequisite for effective mentoring is the mass of practical, pragmatic, time- and energy-saving strategies and tactics for conducting an academic career they already carry in their toolkits. They already know how to set and decide among competing priorities [8], protect writing time [9], manage email [10], say "no" (nicely) to requests to take on tasks that they really shouldn't [11], run an office, hire and manage staff, and the like. Mentees with access to these toolkits can take the enormous amounts of time and energy they save and devote them to academic pursuits and to improving their work–life balance.

The fourth reason is the "authority" that accompanies high professional status and can be used to shelter and rescue their mentees from the unreasonable demands and bad behavior of other, even senior, academics and administrators. When mentees are reluctant to say "no" (nicely) to requests to take on tasks that they really shouldn't, mentors can do it for them (or at least be identified as strongly advising against it). And senior mentors can come down like a ton of bricks on any "sharks" [12] who attempt to harm their mentees by word or deed.

Given the foregoing, although "peer mentors" [13, 14] – drawn from trainees or junior faculty with little or no more additional training or experience than their mentees – can provide excellent moral support and short-term practical advice, they lack the established academic success, networks, experience, and non-competitiveness of the effective mentors that are the focus of this chapter. The exception here, of course, are aging academics who, when seeking mentoring, look to their younger peers.

Effective mentees

The characteristics of effective mentees were identified in the University of California, San Francisco review of qualitative studies in mentorship discussed above, and are summarized in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2   Characteristics of effective mentees

Dimension	Characteristic
Personal attributes	Understanding/compassionate Enthusiastic Nonjudgmental Patient Honest Responsive Trustworthy Reliable Excels at active listening Open to feedback Self-appraising
Behaviors toward mentors	Takes responsibility for "driving the relationship" Respects meeting times Comes prepared Pro-active in identifying and presenting problems and issues Respectful of mentors' time and other commitments

Adapted from [7] Straus SE, Johnson MO, Marquez C, Feldman MD. Characteristics of successful and failed mentoring relationships: qualitative study across 2 institutions. Acad Med 2013; 88: 82–9 with permission from Wolters Kluwer Health.

Personal attributes of effective mentees

Mentees' personal attributes mirror those of effective mentors.

- *Understanding/compassionate*: Understanding "where their mentor is coming from," and deeply aware and sympathetic towards others' challenges and difficulties. For example, if their mentor is reviewing grant applications for several mentees who are working to the same deadline, effective mentees recognize and accommodate these multiple simultaneous demands.
- *Enthusiastic*: Like their mentors, effective mentees also display intense and eager enjoyment and interest in academic healthcare, in the pursuit of the research methods that will generate the new knowledge that will improve it, and in life in general. Enthusiastic mentees keep their mentors stimulated and also provide good role models for junior faculty and trainees.
- *Non-judgmental* about their mentor's values, attitudes and aspirations. While they might not agree with their mentor's ideas about "what is best" for their career paths and development, they will respect them as long as they don't inhibit or otherwise hamper the relationship. That being said, mentees sort out their own values, attitudes, and aspirations for themselves.
- *Patient* with their mentor's schedule, other commitments, and limitations.

- *Honest* in offering their ideas and opinions, in responding to criticisms, and in evaluating the success of the mentorship and how it might be improved (or, if necessary, terminated). When issues arise beyond the experience and competency of their mentors (e.g. parental leave brought to a childless mentor, conflicts with the on-call and on-service scheduling of a clinical department brought to a non-clinical mentor) they should not hesitate to ask for outside help.
- *Responsive* to any and all issues raised by their mentors.
- *Trustworthy* in maintaining the confidentiality of their mutual compact.
- *Reliable* in preparing for mentoring meetings, in keeping mentoring appointments, and in following through with pledges that they make to their mentor.
- *Actively listening*; in responding to their mentors, exhibiting all three steps of:
  - making sure they comprehend what their mentor is saying through both words and body language
  - making sure they retain what their mentor is communicating
  - making sure they avoid roadblocks that often interfere with communication (such as dismissing mentors' concerns or moralizing about them).
- *Open to feedback*: As one participant in a qualitative study of mentoring put it:

  > . . . the mentee should listen to the mentor and take them seriously and that doesn't mean following every bit of advice . . . if you're working with someone and they're giving you advice you know if you kind of ignore all of it then it's sort of a fruitless interaction [7].

- *Self-appraising*, regularly evaluating their performance as budding academics through self-assessment and invited feedback from their mentor, teachers, junior trainees, and colleagues.

Effective mentees' behaviors toward mentors

- The University of California, San Francisco study identified the essential behavior of mentees taking responsibility for "driving the relationship":

  > . . . you can't just go in and be an undifferentiated blob about what you want, you have to really have thought before you go in and meet with your mentor about what the issue is that you need help with and you know it's much more useful if you bring your own analysis in with you and then the mentor can give you their analysis and you can talk [7].

- Effective mentees respect meeting times with their mentors, come prepared with previously identified topics for discussion and timelines for projects, and are pro-active in identifying and presenting problems and issues.
- Effective mentees also follow through after meetings, carrying out the agreed tasks in a timely fashion. In doing so, they are respectful of the mentor's time and other commitments. This respect is expressed by sending drafts of manuscripts and grants [15, 16] in sufficient advance of meetings to permit mentors to give them thorough review; indeed, repeated requests for quick reviews without advance notice has been identified as a source of not only mentor stress and strained relations but, for mentors caring for multiple mentees, mentor burnout.

Productive mentoring

The foregoing attributes and behaviors of both mentors and mentees, when "in synch" and fully exercised, reveal themselves in the five benchmarks of productive mentoring, illustrated in Table 2.3:

- a *personal connection*, beyond friendship and far beyond the ordinary "pupil–teacher" fences
- a set of *shared values* around how one approaches research, clinical work, and social life
- mutual *respect* for each other's time, effort, and expectations
- *clear expectations* about accountability to each other
- *reciprocity* in both efforts and rewards.

  Chapters 3 and 4 will show how these characteristics and behaviors can be harnessed into establishing, executing, and enjoying effective and efficient mentorships.

How many mentees can effective mentors mentor?

We identified 30 colleagues (listed in the Introduction) in North America, Europe, and Africa with track records for effectively mentoring graduate students and junior academics, and asked them this question. Here is our summary of their responses, stated in terms of the "prevalence" of mentees they were currently serving at the time of our survey.

1 At the graduate student/trainee level, they distinguished thesis supervision (which might be restricted to addressing the scientific issues involved in producing and defending a high-quality document) from mentoring for personal and professional career development.
2 Some of our colleagues supervise as many as six theses per year (and lament the end-of-term crush of simultaneous submissions and defenses).

Table 2.3 How the attributes and behaviors of mentors and mentees can result in positive "themes" in the mentoring process

Theme	Illustrations from qualitative interviews
Development of a *personal connection* between mentor and mentee	"... having that connection where you feel like someone actually cares to know what you're thinking and who you are and is really actually doing it because they care to rather than because you know they're forced to". "Mentors and mentees should have the 'same chemistry' but 'not just being friends'". "There are many people that I did meet that had similar interests as me but there just wasn't a personal connection".
Shared values around their approach to research, clinical work, and personal life	"Mentorship worked when mentors were on a fairly common ground, have similar ideas and interests and values".
Mutual respect for one-another's time, effort, and qualifications	"Both individuals need to respect the qualifications of the other and the needs of the other and work together towards a common goal".
Clear expectations of the relationship, outlined at the outset and revisited over time, with both mentor and mentee held accountable to them	"Mutual accountability: not only that the mentor has expectations of the mentee, but that the mentee also has expectations of the mentor". "It's helpful to set up sort of those guidelines in the beginning, sort of what the mentee can expect from the relationship but also what the mentor expects you to know".
Reciprocity: recognizing the bidirectional nature of mentoring, including the consideration of strategies to make the relationship sustainable and mutually rewarding	"It's got to be a two way street – it can't just be a one way giving relationship 'cause then it's just going to burn out. I mean I think the mentor gets a lot out of just the satisfaction of seeing their mentee succeed and that is important onto itself, that's the most important part but you know beyond that the mentor also needs some sort of tangible reward from the relationship that will kind of refresh them and make them keep wanting to come back for more. And that can be you know being on a publication or being recognized".

Adapted from [7] Straus SE, Johnson MO, Marquez C, Feldman MD. Characteristics of successful and failed mentoring relationships: qualitative study across 2 institutions. Acad Med 2013; 88:82-9 with permission from Wolters Kluwer Health.

3 However, they rarely mentor more than three graduate students/trainees at a time (occasionally more than this at the MSc level, and usually fewer than this at the PhD level).

4 The number of mentees they are serving 'full-time' at the postgraduate/ junior faculty level exhibit two modes. Many mentors (especially those with heavy clinical responsibilities) work with just one mentee at a time (and often initiate this mentorship during their mentee's graduate

training), whereas the second cluster of mentors are serving three mentees at a time. Early on, this mentoring is intense, with weekly or even more frequent contact.

5 Mentoring intensity decreases as current mentees succeed in obtaining research grants and generate peer-reviewed publications, creating openings for new mentees.

6 However, academically successful mentees usually maintain links with their mentors, participating in periodic reviews of their progress and priorities, especially when considering job-opportunities.

7 The number of mentees reported above is an underestimate at centers where research associates, study coordinators, etc. also require mentoring.

The "human resource" implications of our survey results for departments and institutions who hope (or claim!) to provide high-quality mentoring for graduate students and new faculty are profound for all, and probably awesome for some. Short-term solutions include "mentoring at a distance" for some mentees' needs, but the creation or expansion of graduate programs in order to reap greater profit or prestige without the creation or expansion of high-quality mentoring capability deserve the resultant whirlwinds of student unrest and falling credibility. Similarly, if universities mandate that every faculty member has to have a mentor, they must also recruit, train, and maintain the additional mentors required to meet this goal, reimburse their additional travel requirements, and recognize their contributions in institutional promotion and tenure processes.

Gaps in the evidence

As we discussed, most of the material in this chapter is at a "moderate quality" GRADE level, based on cross-sectional surveys and interviews of mentors and mentees. We didn't find any literature looking at effective mentorship over an entire research career or for those in different career paths.

Bottom line and scenario resolutions

How well did your descriptions of the ideal attributes and behaviors of mentors and mentees match the ones described in the body of the chapter? If you missed important ones, think why. If we missed important ones, write to us at our website!

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