

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Mentoring—A complex relationship

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Abstract

Purpose: To address the process of mentoring the advanced practice nurse (APN) and provide suggestions for the formulation, implementation, and termination of the relationship.

Data sources: Research studies from nursing as well as other disciplines and personal experience as a mentor and protégé.

Conclusions: Mentoring is a dynamic and complex relationship that can support growth, increase synergy, and develop ways to succeed as an APN. Before entering into the relationship, care should be taken to assure compatibility between the mentor and the protégé. Major pitfalls include poor communication patterns and inadequate identification of objectives. Keys for repair or termination of the relationship include personal introspection, honest and nonblaming communication, and development of alternative support networks.

Implications for practice: Successful mentoring relationships improve professional growth, competency, and productivity. They also form the basis for ongoing preparation of a new generation of APNs.

Introduction

Mentoring is a process designed to bridge the gap between the educational process and the real-world experience. One of the first descriptions of the mentoring process is found in Homer's *Odyssey* where the transformation of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, from youth to mature man, is described using his relationship with Athene (who appears in the form of the man, Mentor) as an allegory for the process of maturing and taking command of difficult situations (Lattimore, 1965).

Mentoring has also been described as a planned relationship between an experienced person and one who has less experience for the purpose of achieving identified outcomes (Dorsey & Baker, 2004). In nursing, mentoring has been defined as a situation that promotes personal and professional development in which general well-being is enhanced, synergy is increased, new insights are gained, perspective on the experiences is developed, balance is created, and ways to succeed are discovered. This results in increased productivity and creativity on the part of both parties (Thorpe & Kalischuk, 2003).

Although mentoring of the undergraduate nursing student has been well explored, the mentoring of the advanced practice nurse (APN), particularly after graduation, is not well documented in the literature. For these nurses, mentoring is often not a formalized process. In Freeman's (2004) study of APNs after graduation ($N = 565$), only 35% reported that they had been assigned mentors, 6% were sought by a mentor, 23% of the APNs sought a mentor, and 17% indicated that they entered into a mentoring relationship by "chance." In fact, 19% of the APNs were unable to identify the genesis of the mentoring relationship. Brown and Olshansky (1997) studied new primary care nurse practitioners during their first year of practice. Their findings indicate that APNs who have a supportive environment during this crucial period are better able to meet the primary care system's productivity demands.

Much of the literature about mentoring focuses on the elements that contribute to successful relationship. An essential characteristic of a mentor is the ability to create a safe place for the protégé to be able to expose his or her vulnerability and be coached into confidence-building and

growth-promoting situations (Davis, Little, & Thornton, 1977). Mentors are viewed as nurses who are experienced in a role and who are in a unique position to instill the values and sociographics of the role (Madison and Huston, 1996; Wilson, 1990). Traditional mentoring functions are seen as both a career function and a psychosocial function (Dorsey and Baker, 2004). Marquis and Houston (2000) contend that most nurses will be lucky if they have one or two true mentors in their entire career. Carroll (2004) indicates that in order for the mentoring relationship to be mutually beneficial, a clear vision of the relationships' components and outcomes must exist.

Other disciplines, including vocational behavior, group and organizational management, psychology, guidance and counseling, and ethics, have published extensively about the characteristics and manifestations of mentoring relationships. Grossman and Valiga (2000) note that it is important for the mentor to observe potential for development in the protégé. Further, the mentor should engage in a process that delivers constructive feedback and nurtures a sense of professional identity. In its ideal form, the concept of mentoring is one that brings to mind the image of a strong and confident senior professional immersed in the role of developing and nurturing a junior who blossoms like a flower in spring as self-confidence and acumen are developed. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Precepting, consulting, and mentoring

Because the understanding of the nature of the mentoring relationship for the APN is not always clear, it is wise to carefully differentiate among a true mentoring relationship and the more short-term preceptor or a consulting relationship. While a mentoring relationship is often initiated to help the protégé move to a new level of professional development, the objectives for preceptorship include instructing a neophyte in the protocols and proficiencies in a role. Like mentoring, the preceptor is usually an experienced professional. Unlike mentoring, the preceptor relationship is usually shorter in duration and has externally set objectives, such as those for a particular course or skill development. After a set time period or documentation of the learning of a particular skill such as intrauterine device placement or joint injection, the student may move on to another site under the tutelage of another preceptor. For example, the APN student will work with a series of preceptors during the clinical rotations in order to learn specific skills or work with a particular population.

It is not uncommon for a nurse practitioner who is in a new position to be assigned a "physician consultant." While this title sounds elegant, it is misleading. This is often

a supervisory process. Almost all states (Pearson, 2005) require that a physician have some sort of oversight on the APN's interactions with patients. Many insurance companies will not reimburse the APN's visit with a patient at the same rate as it does for the physician. There are instances where APNs cannot order certain treatments, refer to a specialty, or write for certain drugs without an additional physician's signature. The match between the "physician consultant" and the APN is not made on the basis of compatible styles and communication patterns but rather to fulfill the state and federal legal requirements for practice.

Expectations for the mentoring relationship for the APN

Freeman (2004) conducted a study that explored expectations of APN protégés for a mentoring relationship. The sample included adult, family, women's health, pediatric, and gerontologic nurse practitioners who had between 0 and over 15 years of experience in their nursing careers. The participants identified five major qualifications of a mentor, including the mentor being an authority in the field, an educator, a counselor, a sponsor, and having personal commitment. As additional attributes, the mentor was expected to be certified, communicative, caring, and competent. Of the 565 participants cited in the report, 72% ($n = 466$) of the participants "Very Much" valued the relationship, while 1.2% ($n = 8$) reported "Limited" or "No Value."

Freeman's (2004) findings are consistent with the data published by Kram (1985) who reported that critical influences on the mentoring dyad are the interpersonal expertise, ability to communicate, and listening skills of both parties. An important element of the expectation for success is that the mentoring relationship is a bidirectional undertaking. It is not just the mentor who bears the responsibility for success, but rather it is a mutual endeavor with recognition of the potential for development of both parties. Protégé expectations for the relationship may include the essential elements of skillful communication, mutual personal commitment, expertise in the field, and the ability to guide the protégé in pathways that will enhance career and personal development.

Because this is a bidirectional relationship, the mentor's expectations of the protégé may also include skillful communication, desire to learn, ability to analyze and synthesize, and, probably most important, the ability to listen to constructive suggestions and reshape behaviors.

Ragins and McFarlin (1990) support the notion that the more experience a protégé has with the mentoring process, the higher the expectation will be for the outcomes of the relationship. Their findings also put forward the notion

that protégés with fewer mentoring relationships perceived that the mentoring was more intense and active than protégés who had been involved with multiple mentoring relationships. It is probable that, like the adage that one can only have one or two best friends, one or two excellent mentoring relationships may be superior to entering into multiple mentorships. Additionally, the mentoring relationship should be carefully crafted so that it is long term, free from destructive behaviors, and contributes to the development of both parties.

Preparing for a successful mentoring relationship

First, it is important for the parties in the relationship to understand what mentoring entails. Mentors should be mature in their skills and willing to communicate *with*, not talk *at*, the protégé. Gibb (2003) indicates that a primary issue is the communication of the objectives of the relationship. The objectives for the mentoring relationship may vary according to the setting and expected outcomes. Explication of the expectations for time commitment on the part of both parties, milestones for achievement, and methods for feedback should be formalized before the relationship commences. It is appropriate to discuss the expected outcomes of the relationship at the outset so that each party is clear about the objectives and term of the venture. It is wise to have them written so that both parties are clear about these elements.

Second, it is wise to have a pragmatic view of the process and the individuals who participate in the relationship. Burke, McKeen, and McKenna (1990) found that idealized images of the mentor and the mentoring process, as well triangulation among a supervisor, a mentor, and a protégé, often contribute to the demise of the relationship. Scandura (1998) noted that mentor-protégé relationships in which the mentor has line authority over the protégé are often overlaid with relational distress and dysfunctional outcomes. Consequently, the more successful mentoring relationships are often ones in which continued employment in the mentor's agency is not an issue.

Third, the maxim "*caveat emptor*" (let the buyer beware) should be taken seriously. It is not enough to seek out a person who is well known or decide that a person would be a good mentor because he or she is friendly. When seeking a mentor, the prospective protégé is wise to examine the mentoring approach of the potential mentor. Talk with the prospective mentor about style, communication patterns, availability, goal attainment, and the approach the mentor has used to implement previous relationships. Reflect on the answers to determine if there is a "good fit" between you. Mentoring relationships are more successful

when the styles of the dyad are compatible in outlook, goals, and style (Fangston-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997). All these issues should be considered before an agreement is constructed.

Fourth, it is advisable to avoid those persons who allege to be mentors but who derive energy from oppressive relationships. Darling (1985) noted four categories for "toxic mentors" whom she described as avoiders, dumpers, blockers, and destroyers/criticizers. First are the inaccessible "avoiders" who seldom are available for advice or support. An early experience of this author was to be assigned to a "mentoring" relationship in which the mentor made it a practice to not return phone calls or to be absent from the office at posted office hours.

The traumatic "dumpers" are next. Their philosophy is "sink or swim, but I won't be there to throw you a life ring." These individuals believe that protégés are totally responsible for knowledge acquisition and do nothing to facilitate the learning. These are persons who expect that a new APN ought to be able to function at an expert level early in the relationship without benefit of guidance or consultation. "That's life in the fast lane," they say, "Keep swimming." Unfortunately, without intervention, these protégés sometimes drown.

The "blocker" is one who consistently blocks the protégé's attempts to be successful either by micromanaging or withholding vital information and is particularly destructive. The protégé seldom, if ever, has an opportunity to grow. Finally, in her "Gallery of Toxic Mentors," she identified the destroyers/criticizers who consistently undermine the protégé in some way. These people are similar to dysfunctional parents who believe that if they constantly criticize and minimize the accomplishments of their children, it will prepare them for the vicissitudes of the real world.

K.L. Stone (personal communication, April 11, 2005) adds other pictures to this destructive portrait gallery. The "smotherer" is one who believes that everything the protégé does must be the mentor's idea. This person thrives on believing that the protégé cannot possibly have a good idea and that a desirable outcome of the relationship will be a clone of the mentor. There is no opportunity for growth and, more significantly, no room for disagreement or discussion. Toxic or pseudomentors who have reputations for any of these behaviors should be avoided at all costs.

To balance this litany of toxic characters, it should be noted that there are unfortunate traits of protégés that can be equally destructive. One is K.L. Stone's (personal communication, April 11, 2005) characterization of the manipulative protégé. This is a person who aligns with the mentor in order to assume the power the mentor holds. Rather than developing and becoming more expert, this

protégé believes there is nothing to learn, only positional power to attain. This person often makes unauthorized pronouncements in the name of the mentor. These statements can have a considerable negative impact on the administrative and therapeutic structure of the practice. A second trait is the jealous protégé. This is a person who becomes envious of the mentor's position. The protégé then displays destructive behaviors that damage the reputation and authority of the mentor. For example, the protégé may indulge in innuendos or backdoor negotiations that compromise the mentor's position. Like pseudomentors, the pseudoprotégé should be assiduously avoided.

Finally, it is essential to realize that, like any intense affiliation, the mentoring relationship will change in characteristics over time. Kram (1983) identified this phenomenon over 20 years ago, and its existence has been supported by subsequent research (Raggins & Scandura, 1994, 1997; Tejda, 1994). The phases of the process are (a) initiation, the mutual selection of the dyad, (b) cultivation, the period of peak mentoring function, (c) separation, the termination of the mentoring relationship, and (d) redefinition, the development of peer friendship. Each of these stages is characterized by changes in the nature of the relationship between the parties. If either partner is uncomfortable with dynamics of the transition, the quality of the partnership will be adversely affected. Continuous monitoring and honest dialogue should be employed to smooth the transition from one stage to another. The mentor should take the lead in identifying healthy changes and communicating to the protégé how this evolution is a positive and growth-producing experience. As the protégé gains confidence and has the sense of positive growth, the mentor's modeling of the qualities of excellence in the mentoring relationship prepares the protégé to assume the mantle of mentor with a neophyte. Table 1 summarizes methods for building a successful mentoring relationship.

What to do if the mentoring relationship has become problematic

Successful mentoring has demonstrated the positive outcomes of growth, positive work attitudes, and career commitment (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). The emotional support of positive mentoring supports the development of confidence, self-worth, and ability to undertake situations that promote career advancement (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang 2002). The unsuccessful mentoring relationship on the other hand can result in anger, isolation, frustration, and low job satisfaction. In fact, the unsuccessful relationship is a lose-lose-lose relationship in that the mentor, the protégé, and the profession at large suffer from its negative effects.

Table 1 Methods for building a successful mentoring relationship

Understand the nature of the mentoring relationship
Monitor the relationship's progress
View the process realistically
Explore compatibility of styles and objectives before initiating the relationship
Avoid pseudomentors and pseudoprotégés
Accept the evolution of the relationship

In problematic relationships, the first step is to identify the problem. Keeping a journal of one's experiences is an excellent way to pinpoint situations in which discordance or success is occurring. Often, individual styles and communication patterns are more evident when the experiences are put into words and analyzed. Darling (1985) suggests that it can be valuable for the protégé to be aware of how interactions with the mentor resemble patterns in previous relationships. For instance, is there a reaction to the relationship in a similar way to the experiences one had as a young person? Is there "baggage" that sparks responses that inhibit growth? Is there a cultural dissonance? Is there a feeling that the mentor is attempting to control behaviors rather than guide learning? This author benefited from regular review of a personal journal during a mentoring experience. She identified the appearance and frequency of emotionally laden words and phrases like "frustrated," "what is she thinking?" and "made me mad." It was helpful to share these thoughts in a regularly scheduled meeting with the mentor so that they could be brought out into the open and discussed honestly.

Second, once the problem is identified and clarified, look at the circumstances that contributed to the problem. Is the mentor/protégé in overload? Have there been significant physical changes in the health of either party? Are there unforeseen changes in the environment that have an effect on the relationship? Has there been clear communication to the mentor of evolving needs? Is there a request or expectation that the mentor/protégé to do the impossible? Are communication patterns angry or demanding? Understanding the life situation and needs of the other person can often give answers to the question of why the relationship changed and became negative. Clearly, learning the role of the APN does not stop in school. The pressure of joining a productivity-based practice, becoming skilled at the charting that supports appropriate coding, and the concern that one will miss a key sign or symptom resulting in a poor outcome are all examples of circumstances that increase pressure on both the mentor and the protégé. These pressures will have a negative impact on the mentoring relationship without specific attention. Clinical conferences designed to open discussion with the members of the practice on issues of ethics, diagnosis, and

strategies for difficult situations can be very helpful. One practice entitles these “Clinical Jazz,” and the sessions are held weekly. During each session, someone in the practice presents an issue or event that was growth producing. Mentors and protégés have the opportunity to discuss the issue and reflect on its ramifications. These sessions are helpful in building trust and dialogue among the participants in the practice (O.A. Pittman, personal communication, April 12, 2005).

Third, work hard on the ability to be honest and open, and discuss the problems without blaming the other. One can manage the relationship by being alert to one’s own needs and stages of growth. Be comfortable with the fact that as human beings grow, their needs and aspirations change as well. Explore what modifications might be acceptable to both parties. Review the objectives for the relationship, and identify what needs to be changed. This might include changes in the direction of the relationship or the styles used for communication. Negotiation is a key factor here. This author learned “the hard way” that being rigid and inflexible in expectations can cause a once beneficial relationship to deteriorate. The relationship was salvaged by the use of a trustworthy third party who was invited to join the discussion. The monitoring and reflection of statements and feelings helped keep the discussion productive and, in the end, preserved it.

Fourth, if a toxic situation exists in which it is necessary to remain for valid reasons (like a protégé who perceives that her career would be destroyed if she “fired” her “mentor”), there are several suggestions. Develop a personal network of support persons. These people may help with perspective and reframing situations so that becoming a victim is avoided. A concomitant approach is to “eat the elephant one bite at a time.” Instead of trying to reconstruct the entire relationship, pick one small piece that is less threatening than the others and work on that. Success in one part will lay good foundation for success in other areas. Most importantly, though, remember that one has internal resources that can be mobilized to help keep the relationship balanced. As confidence in one’s professional abilities is increased, there will be a change in the need for the mentoring relationship and an increase in the independent phase of one’s professional development.

Fifth, if the relationship needs to be terminated, do not do it in anger. Be sure to have planned what and how the subject will be raised, and rehearse verbalizations so that things are not said that will later be cause for regret. Practice communication patterns in much the same way as debaters and politicians do when practicing for an important encounter. Careful documentation of the proceedings can also help assure that each party is clear about what was discussed and strategies that were agreed upon.

Table 2 Strategies for managing an unsuccessful relationship

Clearly identify the problem(s)
Use journaling as a monitor
Factor in external influences
Keep open and honest communication alive
Develop an external network for support
Practice encounters before they occur
Use a facilitator for termination discussions
Document the proceedings

Sixth, consider alternatives to the present relationship so that the process of mentoring is preserved and improved. Remember that one unfortunate mentoring experience should not prevent one from entering another, more carefully constructed relationship. Use what has been learned to be wiser and to be able to anticipate problems before they become overwhelming. The benefits of a productive affiliation with a knowledgeable and skillful mentor are incalculable for growth both professionally and personally. Table 2 outlines strategies for managing an unsuccessful relationship.

Conclusion

Like Athene/Mentor in Homer’s epic, the true mentor recognizes the potential and mobilizes the internal resources of the protégé by validating both through guided experiences. Mentoring is a dynamic and complex relationship that has the potential for increased synergy and successful personal and professional development. Before entering into the partnership, expectations should be identified and mutually agreed upon. Skillful communication, mutual commitment, and a willingness to support mutual growth are important components of successful relationships. The major pitfalls, including poor matching of the dyad, lack of expertise, poor communication patterns and inappropriate identification of the objectives and expectation for the relationship, are the most common reasons for the failure of a mentorship. Keys to the repair or termination of the relationship include personal introspection, honest and nonblaming communication, and the development of alternative networks for support. The broad objective of a mentoring experience is to promote the protégé’s development, not cultivate dependency. Like any human relationship, it needs to be nurtured in order for it to be productive.

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