

A guidebook for mentors and mentees

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Abstract

Someone who respects you more than you deserve, and expects from you more than you think you can give. That is my working definition of a mentor. All of us have mentors, and many of us have mentors yet to be discovered. Not everyone that you encounter who is more experienced or older than you will be a mentor. The term mentor implies an investment in you, an interest in your success beyond just giving input on doing your job. Mentorship may start with technical skills, but any relationship that truly molds you soon evolves into life skills; those skills that allow you to cope with pressure, balance life and work, and interact with other people. This presentation covers some key points about being both a mentor and a mentee. These are learned from tuition paid in both roles. Tuition? It comes in a lot of forms other than \$\$\$.

Key words: bovine, mentor, practice

Résumé

Quelqu'un qui vous respecte plus que vous ne le méritez et s'attend à plus de vous que vous pensez être capable de donner. Voilà ma définition d'un mentor. Nous avons tous des mentors et plusieurs d'entre nous en avons qui restent à découvrir. Parmi les personnes que vous rencontrez, pas toutes celles qui sont plus expérimentées ou plus vieilles que vous seront des mentors. Le terme mentor implique un investissement en vous, un intérêt dans votre succès qui va au-delà de simplement donner des avis sur votre travail. Le mentorat peut impliquer initialement l'acquisition de compétences techniques. Néanmoins, toute relation vraiment transformatrice évoluera vers l'acquisition de compétences pour une meilleure qualité de vie, ces compétences qui vous permettent de résister à la pression, de trouver un équilibre entre la vie familiale et la vie professionnelle et d'interagir avec les autres. Cette présentation aborde des éléments importants à connaître pour être un mentor et aussi un protégé. Ces éléments sont appris avec des paiements perçus pour chaque rôle. Paiements? Ils prennent bien d'autres formes que monétaire.

Defining a Mentor

Someone who respects you more than you deserve, and expects from you more than you think you can give. That is my working definition of a mentor. All of us have mentors, and many of us have mentors yet to be discovered. Not everyone that you encounter who is more experienced or older than you will be a mentor. The term mentor implies an investment

in you, an interest in your success beyond just giving input on doing your job.

Mentorship may start with technical skills, but any relationship that truly molds you soon evolves into life skills; those skills that allow you to cope with pressure, balance life and work, and interact with other people. In veterinary medicine we create the potential for discombobulation when we take students selected for their ability to memorize, regurgitate, and master technical skills, then plop them into a profession where their success depends on their ability to constantly interact with others in an incredibly intense environment. A good mentor addresses these issues and serves as a lighthouse for those choppy, stormy days.

There are some key points about being both a mentor and a mentee that I have observed. These are learned from tuition paid in both roles. Tuition? It comes in a lot of forms other than \$\$\$.

Being a mentee someone would want to mentor (and surviving the experience)

- Mentoring isn't necessarily formal, and you may not always recognize lessons being learned until you think about them later or come across an area where you need to apply them.
- As people, we are built quite differently. Our physical differences are minor compared to how our brains work. Your first step as a mentee is to know how you are built. What is your personality? What are your strengths and weaknesses? You cannot, and should not attempt to assume the same strengths and weaknesses as your mentor. How can you find out how you are built? I found great insight from taking the Gallup CliftonStrengths Assessment. You can purchase the book STRENGTHSFINDER 2.0 by Tom Rath, and it comes with a passcode to take the assessment. The book is a guide to your strengths. For an additional fee you can get the ranking to all 34 categories. Your lowest strengths are as telling as your highest.
- A lot of the guidance and learning that comes through a mentoring relationship comes unfiltered. In fact, that is one of the hallmarks of knowing that you are in one. Part of the process is for the mentee to gain a thicker skin.
- You may not feel like being friends with your mentor on some days, but if you don't feel they have your best interest in mind, then they shouldn't be your mentor. Some of your mentoring can come from observing negative aspects of your mentor. You've got negative aspects too; get over it. Remember that they have their own strengths and weaknesses too.
- Early in careers, we often focus on technical skills. And we should, it is the basis of our professional abilities. Technical

guidance is often the first step in the mentoring process. Some mentoring relationships bloom into more than technical aspects. Some do not. A mentor does not have to help in all areas to be valuable. In veterinary medicine, some of your best mentors may contribute in the areas of communication, reading people, and stress management.

- Don't confuse technical knowledge with the thought process. Seek the mentor who can lead you through how to think (see next point). You must put in the effort to observe this process; you will have few chances to have your mentor sit you down in front of a white board and work you through a case; you must ask questions. Thoughtful questions build the relationship by showing the mentor you are putting effort into the relationship.
- Find a mentor who is having an expert career, rather than being an expert. What is the difference? The book *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise* by Bereiter and Scardamalia was life-changing for me. Someone having an expert career constantly throws themselves at the edge of their knowledge and thought processes, and thrives on it. Their expertise is earned through these bruises.
- Don't confuse your ability to diagnose what happened with figuring out why it happened. Read *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman. Find a slow thinker for a mentor in figuring out why things happened (which is the basis for preventing them from happening again).
- You will have a lot of different opinions from your mentors during your career, and even later may form the opinion that some of what they taught you is wrong. Some of what you tell people is probably wrong too, although your intent isn't that. Forgive them, forgive yourself, take the good, and get down the road. (see thick skin comment above)
- The biggest compliment that any mentor can pay you is that you are coachable.
- If you only listen in order to formulate your response in defense of your actions, then you won't be a very good mentee and will drive away mentors. It's alright to defend yourself, but don't forget to listen first. The goal is a discussion of how to approach a challenge without characterizing any party as right or wrong.
- With that being said, it's OK to say "you were right" every once in a while.
- Recognize when someone is investing time in you rather than just thinking "rookie" and moving on. Thank them for it. Some gratitude, humility, and spunk will bring out the mentor in most people. It's also not a bad way to live.

Being a mentor someone would want to listen to

- Being a mentor to someone is like raising kids, they are always watching what you do and evaluating what you say in the light of what you do. The do carries more weight.
- Passive/aggressive doesn't work in any relationship, especially mentoring. It is easiest for the first 10 seconds, then hardest for years.

- Avoiding making a mentee feel bad can prevent some of the most needed input. You must address things that will help them in their careers. This isn't a license for thoughtless communication, but a mentor must not avoid confrontation or honest, candid feedback. You must know your personality and whether you avoid confrontation or uneasy conversations; this is hard for some.
- Talking through how you made a decision, or your thought process in a case, is invaluable to your mentee. And, the biggest compliment and encouragement you can provide to a mentee is to ask their input on a case or in a situation. Better yet, to act on it.
- You have to slow down for a minute to be a good mentor. Again, just like raising kids, quality time only comes in the middle of a lot of time. Time is our most valuable commodity, and investing in a mentee requires giving time. Mentoring costs time and money; make the conscious decision to invest or don't. A half-committed mentoring process is not good for either party.
- Your effect on mentees will carry for years, long past when your day-to-day relationship with them has faded. They will think about how you would react to a decision or activity, and you become part of their conscience.
- You should read the same books as the mentees, plus *Turn the Ship Around!* By Captain L. David Marquet. Captain Marquet broaches the subject that technical expertise is not the basis for leadership, and speaks of pushing responsibility down to the level of the knowledge and expertise to make the decisions. If you aren't occasionally worrying about things blowing up, then you probably aren't pushing decision authority far enough down the chain and letting your mentee try their wings.
- It's OK to say "you were right" every once in a while.

What do all those points mean?

I was one of those with extensive technical expertise, but pretty naïve about how my clients would actually put the technical aspects into action, and how much they could be helped by things I needed to learn yet. Some of that was just maturing, but learning the social aspects of veterinary medicine (the animals come with owners and managers) can sometimes be a high-tuition, painful experience.

Be on the look out for the false mentor too. When someone outside of your family, friends, spouse, or a trusted mentor starts to blow smoke about how great you are, they are probably trying to get you to buy something or hoping that you can influence someone else to buy something.

What I have found is that for someone to be my mentor, I must respect them professionally and ethically. I don't have to like them every day, but I need to be able to feel they are a friend most days or the equation doesn't work. Gravitate to those who you respect, pay attention, ask good questions, take care of business, ride for the brand, forgive others and yourself, and you will see how many true mentors come out of the woodwork. And don't forget, you are a mentor to someone too.