

Dynamic Duos: Professional Mentorship

Mentorship, whether through a formal or informal system, plays a significant role in a professional's life; it fosters the development of professional expertise and is associated with increased job satisfaction. An effective mentor guides a less-experienced colleague by modeling positive behaviors and building trust, while being cognizant that his or her role is to be dependable, engaged, authentic, and attuned to the needs of the mentee. You can probably name one of your mentors off the top of your head right now!

The original "mentor" was a character of that name in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, but the word is now used to refer to a trusted advisor, friend, teacher, or wise person. In the story, Mentor served as a friend and advocate to Telemachus, the son of the king of Ithaca, while his father, Odysseus, was away fighting in the Trojan War. In 1699, the novel *The Adventures of Telemachus* portrayed Mentor as Telemachus' tutor, and he became the hero of the story.^{1,2}

History holds many examples of mentoring relationships: Socrates and Plato, Haydn and Beethoven, and Freud and Jung. Modern-day duos include Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal, Kirk and Spock, and—dare I say it?—Brady and Belichick. During the Middle Ages, mentorship—particularly in medicine and nursing—was practiced via apprenticeship, which incorporated support, guidance, socialization, well-being, empowerment, education, and career progression.³

Throughout my career as a PA, I have been fortunate to be guided by competent and willing mentors. What have they had in common? For starters, an internal desire (sometimes called *generosity of spirit*)

to mentor and a commitment to my growth and development as their mentee. Successful professional mentors must also possess the necessary knowledge to help effectively develop their mentee's skills. Discussions with my colleagues and previous mentors inspired the following compilation of the essential responsibilities and traits of a mentor.

Initiating new ideas. A main aspect of a mentor's role involves assisting in acquiring the confidence and tools to function and excel in our competitive professional world.^{4,6} In the early 1970s, when I was a young PA, a wonderful physician and friend, Dr. Burton Brasher, took me under his wing and exem-

plified what it means to be a clinician. I learned from him that it was also my obligation to mentor others, and I have tried to do this frequently in my four decades as a PA. Through his example, I was shown the importance of cultivating emotional intel-

ligence and sensitivity while still providing an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Here was a physician who was unencumbered by ego. We met often to discuss the care of both of our patients.

Staying the course. In 1995, I mentored James Cannon—a young financial controller who desperately wanted to be a PA. I've (hopefully) helped him navigate PA school, our mutual time in the military, his time in academia, and his introduction to professional volunteer work. In each stage of his career, we had lengthy conversations about the pros and cons of his decisions. Now, 22 years later, he has become *my* mentor; he has matured in the profession and is at the forefront of taking it to the next level. It is now very common for me to



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call on him for his advice as I move into the home stretch of my career. A few years ago, he became a trustee of our university and his skills have advanced the success of our programs. Indeed, the student becomes the teacher.

Networking and articulating cultural norms. Dave Mittman, the co-founder and original publisher of *Clinician Reviews*, had the experience of hiring his very close friend and PA school classmate, Tom Yacker. In 1985, Dave was publisher of *Physician Assistant Journal* (at that time, the official journal of the AAPA). Dave and Tom were business partners and relied on each other's skills to grow their business. They shared trust, friendship, and a mutual knowledge of pro-

educator." When she met Lori, she says, they just "clicked," and that bond has survived to this day. Lori is now an established academician, mentoring new students and professionals, and modeling her experience with Marie-Eileen's involvement in the profession.

These are examples of when it works. But what happens when the relationship doesn't "click"? Unfortunately, not all mentorships are fruitful. When mentor and mentee clash, it is paramount to acknowledge that the relationship is not working and to back away appropriately, without regard to ego. No one benefits when the parties are at odds—and this may explain why some of the greatest partnerships form organically.

Above all, in order for a mentorship to be prosperous, mentors must express compassion and remain genuine throughout all interactions with their mentee. It is a long-term commitment. Without this generosity of spirit, the influence and benefit of a professional mentor would be lost. If you have other ideas about what makes a great mentor, or how to foster a more satisfying mentor/mentee relationship, please share them with me at PAEditor@frontlinemedcom.com. **CR**

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fessional "culture." They understood each other and how they could each contribute to their success. Their partnership maintained a complementary balance, each of them able to play to his strengths with the support and encouragement of the other. Tom has since used his knowledge and experience to mentor others.

Demonstrating honesty, integrity, and enthusiasm. Marie-Eileen Onieal, our NP editor-in-chief, grew up in a household where her father was a firefighter and union organizer. He taught her the value of always paying it forward. While she has mentored many people in her career, she fondly remembers mentoring Lori Fritz through her transition into academia—what Marie-Eileen calls "the precarious journey of an