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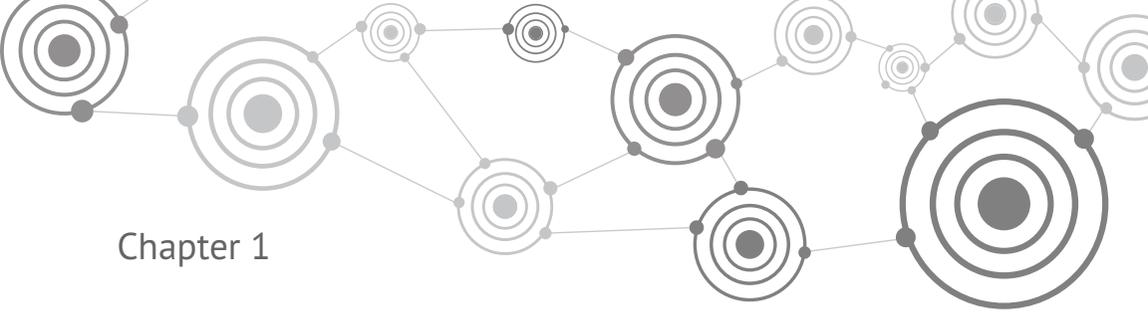
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Commitment, Respect, and Trust:

The Building Blocks of a Strong Mentoring Relationship

Mandi Goodsett

Many formal mentoring programs only call for one characteristic in prospective mentors and mentees: a willingness to participate. However, research has shown that there are specific mentor (and mentee) characteristics and behaviors that encourage a meaningful, lasting mentoring experience. Generally, these characteristics and behaviors fall into three categories: (1) a commitment to the relationship, (2) mutual respect between mentor and mentee, and (3) mutual trust.¹ Fortunately, these attributes can be nurtured in mentors and mentees, especially when the relationship is given careful forethought. In this chapter, the mentoring relationship is examined, particularly the central elements of mutual commitment, respect, and trust. Relevant theory and research are applied and a sample mentoring agreement is appended.

Mentoring Basics

The term “mentoring” is widely used, but its ubiquity has muddled its definition. The *Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring & Coaching* contends that mentoring has five characteristics.² First, a mentoring relationship is a unique relationship

between individuals, and each partnership is different, based on the needs and interests of the participants. Second, while mentoring relationship goals can vary widely, all mentoring partnerships are ultimately focused on learning and the exchange of knowledge. As opposed to other kinds of knowledge-sharing relationships (e.g., coaching, training, etc.), however, mentoring is both a career-related and psychosocial process—it involves both professional development and emotional support. Fourth, mentoring relationships are reciprocal yet asymmetrical. Both members must contribute and engage, and both members may benefit, but the main goal of the relationship is to help the mentee grow. Finally, a mentoring relationship is a dynamic one that changes over time, at times becoming more active and at other times waning in intensity or, when appropriate, ending.³

It is common for the terms “mentoring,” “coaching,” and “training” to be used interchangeably. However, coaching and training are much more specific to the career-related progress that is desired for a new employee. Mentoring, on the other hand, focuses on the career goals of the mentee while also incorporating an element of psychosocial support.⁴ The end goal is not simply a transfer of skills but a positive relationship that provides the mentee with the emotional aid and care that will help her grow as a professional. In addition, because there is usually an expectation of confidentiality in a mentoring relationship, the mentor and mentee can choose to disclose important details that would be inappropriate to share with a supervisor.⁵

Mentoring programs are popular because they have been found to encourage positive professional outcomes for the mentee and deter negative outcomes. Studies bear this out, even across many mentoring contexts.⁶ However, there are additional benefits to mentoring programs and relationships. While the goal of a mentoring program is to meet the needs of a mentee, the mentor often benefits from participating as well. One primary reason is that most individuals have a desire for affiliation and acceptance from others, and a positive mentoring relationship can meet that need for both parties.⁷ Mentoring can also be an opportunity for mentors to review and reappraise the past, share knowledge, reciprocate after having benefited from a positive mentoring relationship themselves, and help shape the future of the profession.⁸

What does it mean for a mentoring relationship to be successful? In this chapter, a successful mentoring relationship is defined as “the degree of positive affectivity associated with the relationship... closely aligned with the gratification of an individual’s needs through the relationship.”⁹ In a successful mentoring relationship, the mentor and mentee feel positive about the relationship and one another, and, perhaps more important, both have met the goals of

the relationship. Such goals may include support and guidance, greater career satisfaction, improved job performance, higher salary, and the opportunity to participate in a positive relationship.¹⁰ It can be helpful to think of a mentor as the guide on a journey that the mentee is taking toward professional goals. For that journey to reach its intended destination, the mentor must be committed to the journey and both parties must respect and trust one another along the way.

Commitment

The first element of a successful match is commitment. In social science research, “relationship commitment” describes a condition in which one or both parties in the relationship perceive it to be important enough to contribute whatever effort is needed to maintain it.¹¹ Commitment has been found to be an essential element of a variety of interpersonal relationships.¹² Research conducted about mentoring relationships, in particular, concludes that mentor commitment is one of the most important indicators of a mentoring relationship’s success.¹³ A lack of mentor and mentee commitment contributes to two of the most commonly reported mentoring relationship problems: unmet expectations and mentor neglect.¹⁴ “Mentor neglect,” which usually refers to the mentor but can also describe the mentee, is the tendency for the pair to interact less and less frequently, which can lead to a mentoring relationship that is tepid and unmemorable.¹⁵ In formal mentoring programs, where mentors are recruited and may be reluctant to participate, mentor neglect can be especially common.¹⁶

When commitment is present, however, it is correlated with pro-social behaviors, such as “spending time together, pursuing shared interests, and disclosing personal information.”¹⁷ Commitment is also a predictor of the mentoring relationship’s persistence.¹⁸ The benefits of commitment to the longevity and success of the relationship can come from mentee commitment as well; both mentors and mentees who perceive their partner as committed consider the relationship to be successful more frequently than those who do not.¹⁹ When both partners in the mentoring relationship commit at least a minimum amount of time to fostering the relationship, the chances are lower that the connection will prematurely fade.

How can commitment in a mentoring relationship be encouraged? In a formal mentoring program, one way is to take care when matching mentors and mentees.²⁰ When the goals of the mentee match the interests and experience of the mentor, there is higher motivation for the pair to spend time together and impart relevant experiences, forming the necessary bedrock of commitment in

such relationships. The level of commitment that both mentor and mentee have regarding the mentoring program should also be considered; pairing a very committed person with a less invested partner can contribute to the relationship's failure.²¹

It is also important that the mentor does not feel coerced into the relationship, as it is less likely that an unwilling mentor will put in the effort and time necessary to fully commit to the mentoring relationship. There are many potential mentor benefits of participating in a mentoring relationship, including tenure and/or promotion credit, an increase in professional development institutional support (e.g., travel funding), an opportunity to improve leadership skills, and a chance for self-reflection.²² These benefits can be important to establishing a mentor's commitment to the relationship.

Another action that can help improve commitment in mentoring relationships is taking the time to establish specific and achievable goals for the relationship early on.²³ This can reinforce relationship expectations and lay the foundation for future communication. Effort should be made to regularly revisit the goals to evaluate progress and keep the relationship on track.²⁴ Allowing the mentee's objectives to serve as the basis for discussion in the relationship can also prevent the mentor's priorities from dominating the relationship. Ultimately, the mentee's goals, not the mentor's agenda, should sustain the relationship and provide focus.

Finally, the mentor should engage with the mentee regularly, exploring relevant topics and keeping a log of what has been discussed. Communication between the mentor and mentee should occur frequently, and the mentee should feel open to ask questions.²⁵ In mentoring discussions, the mentor can provide valuable support by giving the mentee a vote of confidence, helping her work through problems, and giving her opportunities to reflect on her professional experiences. This can be especially important in academic library mentoring relationships, as these programs often help mentees through the promotion and/or tenure process; this source of support is frequently reported to be among the most valuable in academic librarianship.²⁶ Some potential objectives for a library mentor include providing research help, facilitating career counseling, setting long-term goals, offering challenges, opening doors for opportunities, assisting with networking, helping the mentee orient to librarianship culture, providing feedback, and sharing one's own professional experience.²⁷

Of course, it is important for both parties to refrain from overcommitting to a mentoring relationship. In the case of the mentor, overcommitting can result in the mentor emotionally investing in the mentee's actions and experiencing anger or frustration when the mentee chooses a course of action that the mentor perceives as unwise.²⁸ In the end, the mentee is responsible for taking away from the experience

what she considers valuable and making her own decisions.²⁹ It is also important to beware of mentee overdependence. When the mentee is unable to make decisions or move forward without mentor approval, the mentor should encourage greater independence and take steps to bolster the mentee's self-confidence.³⁰

Mutual Respect

Commitment is an important foundation upon which to build a mentoring relationship, but investment alone will not guarantee success.³¹ Mutual respect, while difficult to foster, is essential to a strong mentoring relationship. If a mentee doesn't respect her mentor, she will be much less likely to heed her mentor's advice, especially when it conflicts with her own desires or impulses.³² Although it takes time, mutual respect can be developed by encouraging the mentee's interests, being authentic (for example, by disclosing mistakes), demonstrating integrity, and providing inspirational motivation.³³ When a mentor clearly respects a mentee, it can be a powerful motivator for the mentee to attempt to meet the mentor's expectations.³⁴

Many of the characteristics of mutual respect are consistent with transformational leadership theory, developed by Bass and Riggio.³⁵ Transformational leadership theory describes a transformational leader as having these five characteristics:

1. **Charisma.** The leader compels others to emotionally identify with her and transcend their own self-interest. In a mentoring relationship, the mentor's charisma may influence the mentee to act in ways that are professionally beneficial.
2. **Idealized influence.** The leader serves as a role model and can be relied on to behave ethically and in a value-driven manner. The idealized influence of a mentor may emerge in the ways she models ethical and professional behavior for the mentee.
3. **Intellectual stimulation.** The leader challenges others to be more innovative and approach problems in creative ways. Mentors provide intellectual stimulation by encouraging mentees to question the *status quo* and to find solutions in challenging situations.
4. **Individualized consideration.** The leader teaches others through personalized attention and care for others' individual needs and wants. For mentors, individualized consideration is important when developing mentee goals and giving advice; care should be taken to consider the specific needs and objectives of the mentee.

5. Inspirational motivation. The leader inspires others to achieve their goals with enthusiasm and optimism. In a mentoring relationship, inspirational motivation can be achieved by helping the mentee adopt a vision of the future that is positive and galvanizing.³⁶

Transformational leaders challenge and inspire their colleagues, and mentors should aspire to this as well.³⁷ Using the principles of transformational leadership, mentors can establish respect by modeling for the mentee the attitudes, ethics, methods, and standards of professional behavior; by behaving with integrity; and by demonstrating a commitment to professed values. In addition, mentees want to feel inspired and challenged, and a charismatic mentor who pushes the mentee to reach her full potential can meet that need.

Another important indicator of respect is a willingness to listen actively and communicate consistently.³⁸ Mentors should learn and adopt listening skills, even when the temptation is there to dominate mentoring interactions by sharing stories and dispensing advice.³⁹ Unless the mentor truly listens to the mentee's questions, she will be unable to provide good answers.⁴⁰ Mentees also benefit from listening to and genuinely considering mentor advice. It can take time to master good listening skills, but a mentoring relationship is a good environment to practice communication skills, which can aid the mentor and mentee outside of the mentoring relationship.

A mentor may have more success developing respect for a less experienced mentee if she approaches the relationship with an attitude of curiosity and open-mindedness.⁴¹ Because of the uneven power dynamic in a typical mentoring relationship, mentors may not realize when they are ignoring or dismissing the expertise of a mentee.⁴² Recognizing when the mentee may have valuable knowledge or experience to share can help strengthen the mutual respect between mentor and mentee.

Trust and Honesty

Finally, a balance of trust and honesty can add true depth to a mentoring relationship. According to Mayer, Davis, and Schooman, trust is “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party.”⁴³ Trustworthiness is often thought to be influenced by the benevolence, integrity, and competence of the trustee⁴⁴ (in this case, both mentor and mentee serve as a trustee). The amount of trust a mentee has toward her mentor is directly related to the risks she will take in the

relationship, such as divulging sensitive information or admitting failure, and it is often cited as an important contributor to a mentoring relationship's success.⁴⁵

A mentor can demonstrate benevolence toward a mentee by nurturing a supportive attitude that is built on a genuine desire for the mentee to succeed.⁴⁶ Warmth and empathy are mentor characteristics that are frequently desired by mentees.⁴⁷ A commitment to benevolence can sometimes mean discussing, when appropriate, mentee issues and concerns that may not be directly related to professional work.⁴⁸

In a mentoring relationship, integrity can be thought of as the extent to which the mentor (or mentee) adheres to a set of principles.⁴⁹ Integrity is demonstrated when a mentor conforms to the agreements of the relationship, including expectations of confidentiality, and discloses instances when her decisions are motivated by her own values or principles.⁵⁰ (See Appendix for an example of a mentoring agreement worksheet.) The consistency with which the mentor demonstrates a commitment to her stated professional standards and ethics can impact how much trust the mentee has toward her.

Perceived mentor competence is an especially important indicator of how much a mentee will trust the advice of a mentor. Mentor competence is thought to consist of the virtues, abilities, and skills that the mentee considers relevant to her professional goals.⁵¹ It is common for mentees to desire a mentor with a depth of experience and connections in the field.⁵² When a mentor does not seem to have the knowledge that the mentee desires, mentee respect and commitment are also jeopardized in the relationship; the mentee may no longer be motivated to engage in the relationship or heed mentor advice. The need for a match between mentor competence and mentee goals is yet another reason that the matching process for a mentoring relationship is so essential for success.

The importance of both support and competence in a mentoring relationship is mirrored in social exchange theory. According to this theory, there are two kinds of trust: affect-based trust (a feeling of care and affection) and cognition-based trust (confidence in another's competence and ability).⁵³ This and other models⁵⁴ emphasize the importance of emotional competence—the ability to emotionally handle the topics and discussion that emerge in the relationship—and intellectual competence, which includes the skills and experiences of the mentor as well as the mentor's ability to devise solutions to problems that arise in the relationship.⁵⁵ Mentoring relationships are strongest when affect-based and cognition-based trust are present in both parties. Cognition-based trust is often more important at the outset of the relationship, with affect-based trust becoming more important as the relationship deepens.⁵⁶

Sometimes a mentee will benefit from hearing advice that challenges her plans because the assistance a mentee thinks she needs, and what she actually needs, might differ.⁵⁷ At the same time, it is important for the mentor to recognize that the mentee is more aware of her own limits and goals and is ultimately responsible for her choices. A mentor's willingness to be honest, paired with a mentee's trust in the mentor's competence and well-meaning intentions, allows these difficult conversations to happen successfully.⁵⁸ In some cases, the mentee's subsequent decisions are what make the mentoring relationship most valuable for the mentee.

How can trust be developed in a mentoring relationship? As previously stated, one important indicator of the potential for trust in a mentoring relationship is how well-matched the partners are. A mentor without the skills and experience that the mentee perceives as important for her success will have difficulty building trust with the mentee, so matching mentors and mentees with this in mind is important. Another important trust-building strategy is to enter the relationship with honesty, candor, and openness, even about professional failures or anxieties.⁵⁹ Self-disclosure can be a powerful tool to establish trust and strengthen a mentoring relationship. In addition, as previously discussed, establishing and honoring confidentiality agreements between the two parties opens the door for self-disclosure and mutual protection. Finally, when the mentor approaches the relationship with candor and a willingness to give tough advice, it can help both establish and strengthen trust.

Applying Commitment, Trust, and Respect to Mentoring Challenges

While commitment, trust, and mutual respect are essential foundations for success throughout a mentoring relationship, some particularly tricky challenges for the mentee can highlight the importance of their application.

One challenge that a mentee may bring to her mentor is dealing with a sense of imposter syndrome. Imposter phenomenon (often called "imposter syndrome") is a feeling of "intellectual fraudulence" among high achievers that can paralyze a new professional.⁶⁰ The stress of reconciling feelings of inadequacy with accolades or achievements that feel undeserved can result in anxiety, depression, or even the decision to leave a position or profession.⁶¹

When a mentor is committed to the relationship, she might be willing to help the mentee find some of the mentee's peers to collaborate with, which can quickly

give the mentee a more accurate point of comparison for her own skills. While it requires a sensitive approach, a mentor can show respect for the mentee by providing careful, constructive feedback that provides a more accurate sense of the strengths and weaknesses of her performance. Finally, the mentor can build trust by divulging her own experiences with imposter syndrome—for example, by sharing her experience approaching a project with a lack of confidence but ultimately achieving success. Sharing vulnerable stories can be a great method of establishing trust while also helping the mentee move past the stumbling block of imposter syndrome.

Another challenge that mentees may encounter is the experience of mistreatment because of prejudiced attitudes. In particular, mentees of color or from other marginalized groups may describe the negative impacts of microaggressions experienced in the workplace. Microaggressions are constant, subtle, negative messages that a person is not as smart, skilled, or welcome as others, which lead to harmful psychosocial responses of fear, depression, isolation, powerlessness, or rage on the part of the victims.⁶² Professionals who are experiencing microaggressions may respond in a number of ways, including by searching for safe refuge within or outside of their work unit, avoiding social interactions in which microaggressions may occur, or taking on the burden of challenging the stereotypes exhibited in the microaggressions.⁶³ These actions may help to improve the situation in the short term, but they can impact the mentee's ability to make connections and succeed in the workplace, and they can become exhausting to maintain over time.

How can a mentor address this legitimate and distressing mentee concern? A committed mentor might consider approaches such as building awareness of the problem in her professional community or using her position of power to advocate for the marginalized group to which the mentee belongs.⁶⁴ The mentor can show respect by not making the mistake of dismissing the concerns of the mentee or downplaying their impact on that librarian's well-being. Instead, she should validate the mentee's experiences and acknowledge the real barriers they raise. Finally, the mentor can build and maintain trust by providing empathy and support for the mentee, acknowledging the prejudice these microaggressions reveal, and listening with care. Research has shown that interpersonal comfort, which involves both a sense of trust and a closeness between mentor and mentee, is a predictor of perceived relationship success for mentees of color.⁶⁵

One final challenge that mentees may experience, especially if the mentee is a mid-career professional, is burnout. Burnout can be defined as emotional exhaustion and reduced accomplishment due to overwork.⁶⁶ Burnout can also be caused by extended exposure to microaggressions.⁶⁷ The results of burnout,

which can include cynicism, physical exhaustion, and poor work performance, can be severely detrimental to a mentee's professional success. A mentee who is experiencing burnout may begin to feel a decreased attachment to her colleagues, organization, and profession, and she may begin to withdraw from participation in the workplace entirely.⁶⁸

To help a mentee deal with burnout, a committed mentor may help the mentee set some short-term goals that can be accomplished in small, manageable chunks. When the mentee respects and trusts the mentor, it can be easier for the mentor to help the mentee set boundaries for her commitments going forward, which can go a long way toward combating feelings of burnout. It can be difficult for new professionals to turn down new responsibilities or opportunities, but a mentor who has developed a strong, trusting relationship can succeed in convincing the mentee to say “no” more frequently and reduce her workload for the sake of her own mental health.

The appendix of this chapter contains a short worksheet that may help a mentor and mentee just beginning their relationship to establish commitment, respect, and trust (see Appendix). This worksheet may help both the mentee and mentor better understand how to approach the relationship to best ensure its success.

Conclusion

When a mentor and mentee embark on their journey of growth and support, the relationship's success is by no means guaranteed. Plenty of mentoring relationships deteriorate if one or the other party stops participating actively, or the relationship can end with the mentor or mentee feeling that no meaningful progress was made toward the mentee's goals. However, this doesn't have to be the case. When both mentor and mentee are willing to commit to the relationship, build up mutual respect, and trust one another, the relationship is far more likely to arrive successfully at its destination: productive and positive professional growth.

Appendix

Building a Strong Mentoring Relationship

A planning document for mentees and mentors

Mentoring Relationship Success Plan

Either on your own or with your mentoring relationship partner, make a plan of action for how you will set up your mentoring relationship for success.

Commitment

Time I am able to devote to mentoring relationship each month:

Preferred method of communication: _____

Top three goals of mentee:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Topics of discussion that match goals (check all that are of interest):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research help | <input type="checkbox"/> Offering challenges |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grant writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Help with networking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career counseling | <input type="checkbox"/> Orienting to library culture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Setting long-term goals | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Trust

Trust discussion idea bank:

- Discuss confidentiality
- Tell personal stories to bolster confidence
- Establish expertise
- Develop and employ listening skills
- Build affective trust through empathy

Identify if my mentee is / I am struggling with:

- Imposter syndrome
- Microaggressions
- Burnout
- Overdependence

Respect

What do I have that my mentee needs? If I'm a mentee, what do I need from a mentor?

Try identifying some potential projects that you can accomplish together. Some ideas include a research paper or poster, a conference presentation, a workshop, a grant, an online tool or guide, etc.

Mentoring Relationship Skills

To make a formal mentoring relationship successful, the mentor, mentee, and organizing institution will all need to bring skills and resources to the process. Explore what resources and skills you need to make your mentoring relationship a success below.

Skills/Strengths

What skills and strengths do you already bring to a mentoring relationship? Here are some options:

- Compassion
- Patience
- Time
- Experience
- Enthusiasm
- Listening skills
- Openness
- Charisma
- Focus
- Others:

What mentoring skills or resources would you like to work on developing or acquiring?

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