Chapter 8
Effective Mentorship, Effective Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the ethical and perceptual concerns related to communication between mentors and mentees. The chapter first explores the importance of the mentor-mentee relationships, considering both physical and psychological obligations that when breached can lead to unethical mentoring. The body of effective mentorship research is summarized using a learning taxonomy to conclude characteristics and responsibilities of an effective mentor. Finally, drawing from both communication and educational psychology literature, the analysis of both mentor and mentee practices and responsibilities culminates in research grounded, pragmatic advice for both parties.

BACKGROUND

All doctoral students know that one day, when they achieve their long awaited aspiration of acquiring that first faculty position, they will be expected to teach and mentor students. However, relatively few faculty members are ever trained in
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teaching and even fewer are trained in effective mentorship (Anderson, 2010). This pattern is especially noted in the hard sciences.

Because of this, most faculty members have no training in mentorship aside from their personal experience of being mentored while they were in graduate school. This is especially problematic if they had a poor mentor to model themselves after, left only with a list of things not to do, but really no direction as to what should be done. As such, many faculty members begin their careers without a clear view of what an effective mentor-mentee relationship looks like.

Eventually, faculty gain enough experience by trial and error to develop their own list of best practices, but there are two potential fatal flaws in this self-taught mentoring model. First, most mentors teach themselves by thinking about what I as the mentor should be doing and what works for me rather than individual students. This often leads to cookie cutter styles of mentorship that will not fit each of the unique students that the mentor is likely to guide over a career. Second, if a new faculty member does not have a strong model of what effective mentor-mentee relationships are supposed to look like, then the faculty member is more prone to breaching ethical boundaries (Johnson & Huwe, 2002).

Ethical Considerations Type 1: Good Mentoring Relationships Gone Wrong

One of the largest ethical concerns in mentor-mentee relationships is blurred boundaries (Johnson & Nelson, 1999; Pope & Vetter, 1992; Warren, 2005). Effective mentorship involves one-on-one, personalized guidance. Developing the level of closeness necessary to provide this type of guidance requires a great deal of self-disclosure on behalf of the student, which often relies upon reciprocated disclosure from the faculty member. This can often lead to blurred boundaries in the relationship: a delicate balance between a professional relationship and a friendship.

Friendships can be dangerous in a mentor-mentee relationship. When communication becomes strictly interpersonal rather than professional, the relationship dynamics change. Although the student may feel empowered that their faculty mentor clearly sees him or her as an equal, this perceived relationship elevation can also become a burden. Faculty may not feel a need to immediately respond to this mentee’s questions or begin to feel as though it is acceptable to unload emotional baggage upon this mentee because the mentor perceives that the established friendship creates allowances for lack of professionalism. This problem can work in reverse as well. When students perceive that their relationship with a mentor has developed into a friendship, mentees may also expect certain allowances or forgiveness in workplace expectations: deadlines, quality, clarity, etc. In short, the establishment of a friendship