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Mentoring: Giving Forward While Giving Back

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No one gets there alone. Virtually everyone has been mentored, either formally or informally. Some mentors have been outstanding, others have been good, a few have been awful, and a couple have been downright crushing to the soul and spirit. With all of that positive and negative personal experience gained while interacting with our own mentors, it becomes fairly easy to begin to develop one's own individual view of what makes a truly great mentor, as well as some ideas of how to emulate them.

We start by identifying the best of a mentor's styles and characteristics, and add them to what we appreciate in other mentors. As we take on the form and substance of our mentors, we begin to develop our very own mentoring style. Through trial and error, we test, adapt, practice, and use our acquired mentoring skills.

Eventually, we realize that we have moved into the role of mentor to others and along the way, we have begun creating our own personalized version of what a mentor should be. For me, it became a time of reflecting backwards as I realized the roles mentors have played in my own life and the great debt I owe them. So in thinking about what thoughts I might share with others about mentoring, I naturally looked backwards more than forwards, to the important lessons I received from my mentors as I began my own progression to becoming a mentor to others.

Reviewing my own journey, I discovered twelve mentoring lessons that might be helpful to share. My parents and family members certainly launched the mentoring process in my life, leading me to the first of 12 lessons. (*Lesson #1: Help families to value and appreciate the important contributions they make to nurturing their children's success.*)

Teachers play an equally large and important role. I reflected on the unswerving perseverance with which my middle and high school English teachers insisted we learn to love a well-turned sentence and to appreciate the fun of using interesting vocabulary. For me, "winning" at assembling a well-written sentence within an equally well-organized paragraph became one of life's more pleasurable puzzles. It is an outcome for which those English teachers deserve all the credit. My high school science teachers somehow concluded that I had potential to pursue a career in science, ignored the fact that I was a female from a low-income community, and nurtured my interest in the scientific process. (*Lesson #2: See the potential in everyone.*) One teacher enrolled me in a summer science education experience program, a program with goals similar to the NCI's nascent CURE (Continuing Umbrella of Science Experiences) program and emerging YES (Youth Enjoy Science) program. I observed and counted a lot of riverbed worms and insects that summer. I still do not like them. Another teacher ordered 100 frogs, so I could do a research project for a national science competition. (*Lesson #3: Give mentees opportunities to see their own potential.*)

An unknown classmate released all the frogs in the gym the evening of the school prom, appropriately themed, "Some Enchanted Evening"! The same nurturing teacher helped me to salvage enough of my project, so my outcomes paper could at least limp to the competition. (*Lesson #4: Recognize when someone needs your help and encouragement and give both generously.*)

I vividly remember the professor who never failed to convey the impression that she had all the time in the world for any student who stopped by to talk with her. (*Lesson #5: Make every student feel valued and listen when they seek your attention.*) Then there were my literature professors, whose lectures and highly animated readings of the literature were so engaging that I signed up for every course in their series. Science almost lost me to literature! (*Lesson #6: Freely display your enthusiasm for your field if you want to fully engage your students in it.*) Another professor invited every student he taught each semester to his home for a dinner and discussion

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session. (*Lesson #7: Nothing is more valuable than a peek at the whole personal mentor role model, so share those parts of yourself generously.*)

Another professor gave up a chunk of his summer, so that I could complete my master's thesis before I was scheduled to leave for my fellowship in London. (*Lesson #8: Make time to help a student reach the point of closure in an important academic step.*) Once in London, an academic mentor invited me to ride along on his second job as an on-call “police surgeon,” giving me exposure to the harsh realities of both living and dying. These were circumstances I could never have otherwise experienced, thereby highlighting the potential to make one's career as exciting, stimulating, and meaningful as one wishes. Police ride-alongs in London also opened my eyes to seeing there could be diverse ways of using one's education to engage in activities outside of the traditional professional box. (*Lesson #9: In addition to helping your students see the exciting and energizing facets of your field, open their eyes to alternate ways of deploying their knowledge and skills.*) In spite of tackling my PhD, I was still not truly seeing myself as a scientist until I met my next mentor. Well-published and highly respected by the British National Health Service, he explained that good science was really just careful methodical data collection and counting. (*Lesson #10: Show your mentees how easy it is to develop the next level of mastery of their field and the ways to do so.*)

As I mentored more students, I paid more attention to other mentors as they applied their skills. I noticed that the best mentors had a variety of mentoring styles and agilely moved

among them to achieve the best outcomes for their mentees. They were also very comfortable asking other mentors for advice and coaching when their own skill sets were insufficient to help a mentee resolve a problem. (*Lesson #11: Keep discovering ways to improve your mentoring skills.*)

Mentoring is amazingly satisfying and emotionally rewarding. From thank you notes to invitations to weddings and birth announcements, mentees show you how your efforts helped them to progress in meaningful ways. (*Lesson #12: Remind mentees to stay in touch with you because you are genuinely interested in them, not just their careers.*)

In closing the circle of my thoughts on mentors and mentor appreciation, I arrived at my final lesson. (“*Cheaper by the Dozen*” *Lesson #13: Remember to thank your own current and especially your long ago mentors whenever possible.*)

Clearly, good mentors are made, not born. They evolve from other good mentors. These lessons of mine may help to build confidence among those mentors who are at the earliest stages of their mentoring careers and help to make today's great mentors even stronger. In the course of helping their mentees, mentors are simultaneously serving as mentor role models, as they help to convert their current mentees into the next generation of effective mentors. Mentors' efforts are like an endowment—they just keep on giving—to the current generation of mentees and to the creation of the next generation of mentors! We are all in this together!

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