On Becoming a Successful Mentor

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I have been mentoring, quite successfully, in a variety of settings for many years, but I have never had to explain why or how I do what I do so well. So, I put together a few thoughts (totally subjective) based on my experiences as a mentor over the years.

Don’t just teach or advise. Be a Teacher (literally with a capital T), someone who offers guidance, points the way, provides a sense of direction. A mentor, as a Teacher, should be someone you can bare your soul to who understands your feelings. It’s also like being a big brother, a father. Definitely, it is about being a friend.

Each and every element of my vast and varied experiences and their sum total have contributed and empowered me in mentoring students. However, I have come to realize that experience and knowledge, by themselves, do not necessarily turn one into being a highly effective mentor. A mentor has to have the proper attitude and characteristics. A mentor must ask himself: how much time and convenience am I willing to sacrifice for my students’ benefit; am I willing to go the extra mile, to really, really be there for them. A mentor has to be a Giver, not a Taker, he must be a “human being” in the fullest sense of the words - and it is essential that he communicates it to his students.

In that context you should watch a short video clip, “the Still Face Experiment,”1 presented by Dr. Edward Tronick, Director of the Child Development Unit a Harvard University (try the link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0 ).

No matter the age group, the message remains the same: as mentors (the adult in the video clip) we control the interaction and it is essential that the students perceive us as approachable and responsive.

What I can suggest to you:

You must be enthusiastic about your students’ success and show it.

When mentoring you should act professionally, be open and believable. Turn your cell-phone off (or mute it) and put it away, do not look or even glance at your watch, it sends the wrong message!

Remember, confidentiality is key to a mentor’s success. Nothing your students tell you can be used against them! By the same token, never say anything against their parents’ advice or advice/decisions of your colleagues, simply offer an alternative opinion. Discuss your students’ disabilities with them, ask intelligent questions, and find out how you can assist them above and beyond compliance with the University’s guidelines.

Go to sports events and cheer for your students, attend their music recitals and dance performances, make sure they know you were there. Give them the respect and attend their awards ceremonies and academic presentations. Visit them at the hospital should they fall ill.

Do not be afraid to make mistakes (as long as you admit them), be open to your students’ suggestions, and turn to them for assistance when needed.

You have to realize that as a mentor you can’t ‘sit on the fence’. Your students expect you to take a stand, to be decisive yet flexible. Your actions must make Yoda’s maxim clear to your students: “Do or do-not, there is no try!”

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We live in the so called “digital age”, a two-dimensional world where e-mails have replaced verbal conversations, Facebook has replaced human social interaction, and the gist of our wisdom is limited to 140 characters on a five inch screen. So, trust me when I tell you this: our students need us now more than ever before. They need someone mature to talk to, exchange ideas with, look for answers to questions where Google has never gone. They crave real human interaction and communication, and they look to us, teachers, advisors and mentors to nourish that basic need.

This interaction is a two way street, and I have benefitted tremendously from being a mentor. It has reinforced me and enabled me to provide students with a better, clearer sense of direction, it has empowered my ability to paint a clear picture of the road “not taken” – yes, they do not come to me for the obvious, they want the hidden revealed, the unknown exposed, the improbable turned into reality – both of the world around them and the world within themselves.

Imagine everything you had ever wished for in a wise, trusty, dependable friend, then turn around and be that guy; apply yourself with passion to what you do and your path to success as a mentor is guaranteed.

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