

Mentorship: Some Experiences, Reflections, and Suggestions

Barbara Gastel

Mentoring in CSE and Beyond: Personal Support in Professional Development—Patty Baskin, Leslie Neistadt, and Barbara Gastel have long been leaders for the CSE Mentorship program. Based on a session from the 2024 CSE Annual Meeting in Portland, they have developed a series of articles on mentorship. The other two articles are available here: <https://doi.org/10.36591/SE-4704-02>; <https://doi.org/10.36591/SE-4704-03>

Mentorship has existed for millennia, but the current emphasis on mentorship in professional contexts seems relatively recent, as does the sometimes-related concept of imposter syndrome. Although the term “mentor” is based on a character in *The Odyssey*, the term “mentee” seems to date to 1940.¹ A published description of the imposter phenomenon first appeared in 1978, as noted in the accompanying piece² by Leslie Neistadt. The term “imposter syndrome” seems to have first appeared in 1982.³

My time as a mentee, mentor, and person interested in mentorship has spanned much of this recent era. In this article, I share some experiences, reflections, and suggestions.

Some Experiences

My experiences as a mentee date back to the late 1960s. A scientist whose laboratory I worked in while in high school became a mentor and a model for my own mentorship style.⁴ Ditto for an academic physician for whom I worked in summers during college and medical school. Not so for another potential mentor, assigned through a science communication fellowship program. Although we shared an office—where he smoked incessantly, as was still allowed—he barely acknowledged me. I learned from his skillful work but obtained mentorship from others at the publication.

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Since entering academia in the early 1980s, I have had multiple mentees. Most have begun as my students or advisees. Some are from my international work. And some are from mentorship programs, including CSE’s. Most of the mentorships have been rewarding; I have enjoyed seeing mentees’ careers develop, learned from my mentees, and been heartened to see some become mentors themselves. However, some mentorships—such as one where the mentee repeatedly failed to show up for meetings—have not worked out so well. The most successful and enduring mentorships, I believe, have been those where the prospective mentee perceived a resonance and sought continued interaction, regardless of whether it was labeled “mentorship.”

Some Reflections

A favorite passage about mentorship comes from an essay in *JAMA*.⁵ It reads as follows:

You can assign advisors, not mentors. A mentor and a student will come together because they sense it is right for both of them—not because a committee decides it suits some abstract bureaucratic goals. An advisor can show you how to write a grant proposal, how to get a research project started, or how to get promoted. A mentor will show you how to live your life.

Some largely related reflections:

- A mentor needs resonance with you. An advisor need not have it. If, however, such resonance exists, the advising relationship may well evolve into a mentoring one.
- An advisor must provide guidance—for example, by sharing information, introducing resources, or providing structure. Commonly, a mentor also provides some guidance. However, much of the support may be more global—for example, by providing validation, serving as a sounding board, or helping the mentee analyze a problem.
- What institutions and organizations term “mentoring” is often largely advising. The advising might develop into mentoring, but it can be useful even if it does not.
- A mentor need not look like you. Emphasis sometimes is placed on assigning mentors of the same gender, race, ethnicity, or such. Such commonalities can contribute to resonance. But they are not imperative. My scientist

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mentor was 6' 7", blond, and a veteran. I am far from any of those. Yet our styles and values promoted rapport. Similarly, I have had mentees of varied races, nationalities, religions, and more. What is important in mentoring seems to go deeper.

Some Suggestions

Based largely on my experience, here are 10 suggestions for mentoring (or for advising that verges on mentoring).

1. **Find out the mentee's goals. However, don't feel limited to them.** Gear the mentoring to the mentee's aspirations, but do not be restricted by them. A mentor can broaden a mentee's horizons.
2. **LISTEN.** A mentee may benefit greatly from a nonjudgmental, perceptive, informed listener. Often, talking with a mentor helps the mentee clarify ideas and priorities and proceed accordingly.
3. **See yourself as part of a mentorship array.** A mentor is not a placenta, providing everything the mentee needs. Rather, a mentor is part of an array. Provide the guidance you can, and help the mentee find people and other resources to fill other needs. Doing so can serve mentees best and help allay mentors' imposter syndrome.
4. **Don't feel that you need all the answers. But help the mentee seek answers.** Doing so is a corollary of the point above. A plus: It models information-seeking behaviors for the mentee to develop.
5. **Give mentees chances to learn from your experience. However, don't overdo it.** Mentees can benefit vicariously from your experiences. But remember: The purpose is to help the mentee, not to reminisce for your own satisfaction.
6. **Be frank about your own struggles and vulnerabilities.** Even successful professionals sometimes face difficulties or lack confidence. Sharing your own challenges and insecurities can demonstrate how to deal with such items and help allay mentees' imposter syndrome.
7. **Don't term ideas "impossible."** Rather, guide the mentee in exploring their feasibility. Squelching ideas can squelch a mentoring relationship. Even if an idea seems infeasible, explore it with the mentee. Doing so can help develop critical thinking. And the idea might turn out to be workable after all.
8. **Realize different mentorships have different styles.** Different mentors can have different styles. Even for the same mentor, different styles may suit different mentees. Be flexible.
9. **Realize that mentorships evolve—and dissolve.** Mentorships change over time, and the duo may drift away from each other. Doing so might not indicate failure. Rather, the mentorship might have achieved its goals and so is no longer needed.
10. **Realize that some benefits of mentorship may be intangible.** Sometimes mentorships have tangible benefits, such as the mentee finding a job. But sometimes they have intangible benefits, such as the mentee's increased self-confidence. The latter are valuable too.

Finally, *learn from the mentee, too.* Science-editing mentees bring distinctive knowledge, fresh perspectives, thought-provoking questions, and more. Learn from them as they learn from you.

About the CSE Mentorship Program. The mentor/mentee relationship (dyad) is a 1-year commitment (from one CSE annual meeting to the next) that usually involves regular phone calls and may include other activities of interest to the mentor and mentee. If you are interested in acting as a mentor for a CSE colleague, fill out an application for the mentoring program on the CSE website. If you would like to HAVE a mentor, you'll also apply on the CSE website. Many CSE members have indicated their enthusiasm about mentoring their colleagues.

The Mentorship Committee. The Committee, which always welcomes new members, oversees the program, matches the dyad pairs after screening applications, and provides basic training materials for the dyad pairs to begin their relationships. These training materials include 3-month guides for both members of the dyad, suggesting optional discussion items for each meeting, with the pairs encouraged to be flexible to make the partnership most effective.

References and Links

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