
Malpractice: Mentorship Gone Wrong



Much has been written about what makes a good mentorship relationship. This, perhaps, gives the false impression that all mentor-mentee partnerships are productive ones from which both parties benefit.

But there are several models of mentorship relationships that are not advantageous and it is the mentee, the vulnerable student trying to gain academic and practical experience, who suffers.

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The three researchers have identified six types of poor mentors and they say it's mentees who should recognise when a relationship is dysfunctional and know when to put an end to it.

The Exploiter

"The Exploiter torpedoes mentees' success by saddling them with low-yield activities. Typified by self-serving advice, Exploiters commandeer mentees by thrusting their scientific agenda or non-academic responsibilities onto them, often justifying such behaviour as "the price of mentorship" or "a valuable learning experience," the team says in their research. Exploiters may assign mentees to mentor other trainees but not in the mentee's area of expertise. In this way, Exploiters value managers, not independent scientists, and have no interest in cultivating mentees.

The Hijacker

"Hijackers are bullies who take hostage a mentee's ideas, projects, or grants, labelling them as his or her own for self-gain. Mentors who engage in this form of malpractice often do so in the setting of career challenges such as shortages of funds, publications, or intellectual creativity. Notably, some mentees are unknowingly complicit in this behaviour, comforted by feeling valued regardless of the underlying pretext."

The Possessor

"The trademark of the Possessor is domination of the mentee. Possessors are insecure and view seeking assistance from others as a threat to their position," the researchers say. "Such anxieties lead possessors to take a passive-aggressive approach to collaboration, disparaging potential co-mentors or demeaning the mentee for reaching out to others. Like a battered spouse, mentees in this relationship become isolated from social and collegial interactions, making it difficult to recognise or be rescued from the Possessor. Rather, mentees are often lured into feeling special by the attention of the Possessor, who does so only to fulfill his or her own needs."

The researcher also identified what they call "Passive mentorship malpractice" which they say is "insidious". The pinpoint three types of such mentors.

The Bottleneck

"Bottlenecks are preoccupied with their own competing priorities and have neither the bandwidth nor the desire to attend to mentees. Their internal focus quickly diminishes mentee productivity, a phenomenon that is particularly problematic for early-career researchers. The rate-limiting behaviour of Bottlenecks is accentuated when they insist on signing off on a work product, essentially handcuffing mentees to their timeline. While the quality of the feedback may offset this cost, mentees always pay the price in diminished academic output when working with Bottlenecks."

The Country Clubber

"The mentor who wants to be everybody's friend and evades conflict—regardless of need—is the Country Clubber. These mentors avoid engaging in difficult but necessary conversations on behalf of the mentee such as negotiations regarding protected time, authorship positions, or research support," say the research team. "They minimise the importance of conflict and encourage mentees to do the same. Country Clubbers view mentorship as a ticket to popularity, with the number of mentees serving to promote social capital rather than responsibility. Mentees in this relationship are not only unsupported, but also find it difficult to assert themselves given the "nice guy" routine."

The World Traveller

"These mentors are highly successful and sought after for meetings, speaking engagements, and leadership positions. Consequently, they have little time for their trainees on a day-to-day basis. Ironically, the more successful a mentor becomes, the more at risk of developing this form of malpractice. The world traveller can take a laissez-faire approach, leaving the mentee effectively mentorless from lack of face-to-face time and direction."

The team stresses that malpractice in mentorship is a result of either willing or unknowing participation on the part of both mentor and mentee. A strategy for the mentee is necessary in order to identify a poor relationship and extract themselves from it. They recommend the following:

- "Don't Be Complicit: Whether it is sacrificing papers to the Hijacker or accepting chores with no academic yield for the Exploiter, mentees are tacitly complicit when mentors malpractice. Mentees must therefore insist on change when mentors malpractice";
- "Set Boundaries and Communicate Needs: Effective communication helps prevent mentorship malpractice. This is particularly important when dealing with passive phenotypes; with active phenotypes, mentees must set firm boundaries and confront mentors when violations occur";
- "Establish a Mentorship Team: All forms of mentorship malpractice become more dangerous when the mentee is dependent on one mentor. Having several mentors allows mentees to not only learn from each advisor, but also more easily recognise dysfunction. For example, Hijackers stand out like a sore thumb in comparison to Country Clubbers, whereas the World Traveller's lack of availability can be partly overcome by the involvement of others";
- "Know When to Walk Away: Some malpractice is so egregious and refractory to countermeasures that it should be viewed as a deal breaker. This is most true of the Hijacker but should be considered for others when countermeasures fail. If a mentor is sabotaging the mentee's career, consciously or otherwise, mentees must be prepared and willing to end the relationship."

Conclusions

The research team conclude their work by emphasising the importance of the need for effective mentors in times of a shortage of research funds.

"Failure to do so can result in catastrophic loss," they say. "Academic medicine can no longer afford such behaviour."

Source: [JAMA](#)

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