

Mentor and Trainee Relationship – The Sad Truth

<p>This role play involves a faculty mentor who must somehow deliver the conclusion to a good-natured student that s/he is not PhD material; a faculty confidant who helps the mentor decide on a good approach; and the hapless student who has long been unwilling to see the handwriting on the wall.</p> <p>Roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty Mentor • PhD Student • Trusted Colleague <p>Scenarios</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty Mentor discussion with Trusted Colleague <p>Faculty Mentor discussion with PhD Student</p>	<p>Role Play Tips</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed role descriptions and prompts are provided to guide the role play. This is not a strict script. Encourage role players to familiarize themselves with their characters and get creative! • Encourage role players to use their actual names in place of character names. • Experiment with changing the prompts to inject some variability in role play dynamics (e.g., have a character offer a conciliatory opening line or a belligerent opening line to see how that changes the course of the role play). • Run a role play more than once, changing role players.
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Role Play: Faculty Mentor Role

Character Description: Faculty Mentor

You are working with a pre-doctoral student. S/he is in many ways an ideal person. S/he's collegial, shows up to work on time, works long hours, meets deadlines, and gets along well with others. Everyone likes him/her. No one would want to offend him/her, least of all you.

There is just one problem: s/he does really poor work. In contrast to his/her considerable social skills and dedication to becoming a PhD scientist, s/he does not really have the kind of intelligence, insight or skill that makes for good science. His/her experiments often need to be re-run by someone else. S/he is a poor writer and makes a lot of data entry errors. You and others have confronted him/her about these problems in the past. When you do so, s/he readily admits that his/her work is not great and apologizes profusely. You cannot help but feel bad when you criticize him/her. S/he will sometimes even work longer hours to remedy things. However, s/he shows no signs of improvement, and people in the lab are beginning to think s/he's not terribly bright.

After a year of mentoring, you have come to believe that s/he will never finish his/her PhD and is not really suitable for ongoing work as a scientist. Yet you are reluctant to tell him/her this. It is painfully obvious to you that all s/he ever wanted to do was be a research scientist. Every time you talk yourself into broaching the topic, his/her response has been that s/he will try harder. It goes against your every inclination as a faculty mentor to deliver a message that fails to recognize someone's strengths and destroys their sense of efficacy. Your student is not stupid; s/he is just not cut out to do doctoral-level science.

Role Play: Pre-doctoral Student role Guide

Character Description: Pre-doctoral Student

You are a PhD student, entering your second year of coursework. You are the individual who is struggling. You chose your mentor mostly because you learned from other students how wonderful s/he is to work with and how involved s/he is with his research and laboratory personnel. Unlike other senior faculty members in the department, s/he is compassionate, approachable, and involved. S/he enjoys helping his students develop professionally inside and outside the lab. You believe you are in a great working and learning environment. You are determined to prove to everyone that you are cut out to be a scientist despite all evidence to the contrary. Even though you struggle with conducting experiments according to established protocols, you work extra hard to compensate for your shortcomings. Since coursework is extremely challenging for you compared to other students, you spend more time studying but feel like it will all pay off in the end when you finish the doctorate. Your comprehensive exams are next summer.

Your mentor has spoken with you on various occasions about your work being inadequate. You know you are spending countless hours redoing experiments in the lab, but rather than give up, you simply redouble your efforts. You believe your strong work ethic is improving your skills and knowledge as a junior scientist. You trust your mentor to guide you past this rough patch.

Role Play: Trusted Colleague Role Guide

Character Description: Trusted Colleague

You are a Trusted Colleague to the Faculty Mentor. You have been friends for a long time. You've heard him lament the lack of progress in one of PhD students before. You think it's time your colleague confront this hapless student about moving him/her out of the graduate program into a different role where s/he can be effective.

The following are the kinds of questions an insightful confidant might ask:

- What are the specific attributes that make this student unfit for a research career and how can you explain them to the student in an objective (but compassionate) way?
- What do you think will happen if you don't intervene now? Are you really being kind by delaying the inevitable?
- Does s/he know what the job market would be like for him/her?
- Does s/he know what it would be like to have his/her teaching and research evaluated as s/he approaches a tenure decision, if s/he gets that far?
- What university resources have you involved to try to help rectify this student's deficits or to meet his/her needs?
- Are there relevant career paths that s/he could pursue with the training and aptitude s/he has? What qualities do you think s/he has that would be winning traits in some other kind of career?
- How will you balance your mentor responsibilities to your other pre-doctoral students?

Scenario One

As a long-time faculty member, you call on your wise friend (Trusted Colleague) to come over to your office to help you think through this problem.

Prompt

Trusted Colleague: “Hi, there, how’s it going?”

Faculty Mentor: “Fine, fine.”

Trusted Colleague: “You don’t sound it.”

Faculty-Mentor: “It’s one of my trainees. S/he works so hard, but s/he’s just not cutting it. I’m afraid s/he’s just not that bright. When I talk to him/her, s/he recognizes the problems I mention, but that just makes him/her apologize and work harder. I don’t think s/he is capable of completing our degree program, but I don’t have the heart to tell him/her point blank. I’ve tried to hint at it several times, but s/he seems to ignore the possibility and grows more determined. S/he says his mother told him/her that s/he can do anything s/he puts his mind to.”

Trusted Colleague: How do you respond?

Scenario Two

The Faculty Mentor has arranged for his/her struggling Pre-doctoral Student to drop by his office at a time when they will be alone for a private talk over a cup of coffee.

Prompt

Student: “Hi, you wanted to see me?”

Mentor: “Yes, thank you. I wanted to talk to you about your future plans. How do you feel things are going for you in the lab and the degree program?”

Student: “Great. It’s hard work, but I love it and I love the people. It’s what I want to do with my life.”

Mentor: How do you respond?

Take Away Points

- The mentor-mentee relationship requires both parties to proactively set expectations for the relationship and reasonably meet each other’s expectations. For this reason, and to avoid future confusion, it is important that the mentor provide the mentee with

written guidance on accepted practices and responsibilities from the onset of the relationship. Mentees can also facilitate this process by proactively asking questions to their mentor about research practices and responsibilities.

References

DuBois, J., Sieber, J., Bante, H., & Partin, K. (n.d.). RCR Casebook: Stories about Researchers Worth Discussing. Retrieved November 7, 2019, from <https://ori.hhs.gov/rcr-casebook-stories-about-researchers-worth-discussing>.