Mentoring When the Going Gets Tough: The Importance of Empathy and Problem-Solving in the Mentor Relationship

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Abstract

The nature of the mentor relationship dictates that, in all probability, the mentor will not only guide and support the protégé through a learning process, but will also assist in times of challenge and distress. While most mentors desire and intend to be of assistance in such circumstances, good intentions do not necessarily translate into maximal support. This article addresses two components of successful mentor relationships that are considered crucial to maximizing effectiveness through challenging times: empathy and problem-solving skills. The article explores the connection between these factors while offering practical tips on their expression and implementation toward life-long impact.

*Keywords:* mentor, empathy, problem-solving
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How does one define mentorship? Is it teaching? Friendship? Counseling? Coaching? Supervising? Apprenticeship? Is it some combination of all of these? In their comprehensive review of mentoring research, Haggard et al. (2011) acknowledge a wide variety of mentorship definitions and outline the need for researchers to clearly delineate their working definitions for the purpose of construct validity. They further propose that any definition of work-related mentorship include the core attributes of reciprocity, developmental benefits, and consistent interaction over a period of time (Haggard et al., 2011). For the purposes of the present discussion, it may be appropriate to adopt a simple definition penned by Kuhn et al. (2006) regarding the mentor relationship in an academic setting; the authors describe the mentor relationship as “an ongoing, caring relationship in which an advisor gives time, support, and encouragement to the mentee” (p.26). They further describe the mentor as one who helps the protégé meet his potential by serving as a role model and friend (Kuhn, 2006).

Regardless of definition for mentorship, most educators enter their fields in order to significantly impact the lives of the students they encounter. Many wish to invest in students and colleagues in a more in-depth, individualized way when the need and opportunity arises. Every now and then, educators get the chance to work closely with individuals as they develop their life goals, skills, and talents, potentially entering into what would be considered a mentor relationship.

A useful comparison may be drawn between teaching, counseling, and mentoring:
The teacher says: “I will show you how to pave a path with great potential for success. I will share knowledge in my particular areas of expertise and will help you develop the skills you will need along your way.”

The counselor says, “I will assist you as you encounter obstacles along the path. I will help you meet challenges that impact you both personally and professionally, always encouraging growth, and I will give you the tools to problem-solve when future obstacles are encountered.”

The mentor says, “I have already paved a path. My life’s map is open for you to study. I will offer you direction based on my experiences, both successful and unsuccessful. I will encourage you to choose at what points you want to match me step for step, and at what points you want to diverge and explore your own way, and I will come alongside you as best I can.”

One might say that teaching assists primarily in professional skill development, counseling primarily in personal skill development, and mentoring may assist in either or both areas. Although these generalizations may seem oversimplified, the distinctions can be useful in defining a relationship between mentor and protégé.

Because mentorship involves the process of experiencing life together, the mentor need not be surprised when obstacles are encountered. Obstacles may be professional, personal, or both. For example, professional obstacles may be related to underdeveloped skill areas, professional relationships, career or job choices, or other issues affecting professional success of the individual. On the other hand, personal obstacles might include emotional, social, physical, spiritual, familial and/or financial challenges, along with all of the difficult decisions they bring to the table. Anecdotal evidence supports the notion that mentors can play an important role in the success and satisfaction of young professionals, and de Janasz et al (2003) propose the use of multiple mentors for mentees placed in work settings that are known to be particularly
stressful or challenging. Multiple mentors can offer additional positive influence for protégés in such situations.

The wise mentor knows the limits of his or her ability and refers the protégé to professional counseling or other healthcare when needed. Kuhn et al (2006) outline important signals that indicate a protégé may need referral to counseling services. The trigger point for referral to counseling will vary from mentor to mentor and should take into consideration the protégé’s coping abilities, the severity of the problem, and the mentor’s training and comfort level in dealing with the relevant issues (Kuhn, 2006).

Although professional counseling is recommended in situations that could impact the health and safety of the protégé or those around him or her, many obstacles may be tackled within the mentor relationship without or in addition to professional counseling.

Given that every mentor and protégé can expect to encounter challenges and barriers, how can the mentor prepare? What if the mentor is just as perplexed by a situation as the protégé? What if the mentor feels ill equipped to offer advice or assistance but does not perceive the need for professional counseling in that circumstance? Or, what if, as many of us have experienced, the mentor has plenty of sound advice but the protégé is not receptive? In my experience as a music therapy educator and mentor, I have found two factors to be particularly crucial to good mentoring in the face of challenge: empathy and problem-solving skills.

**The Importance of Empathy**

Among the many relational factors that can influence the quality and character of mentor relationships and even how problem-solving is approached within the relationship, empathy seems particularly important. Empathy is commonly defined as a distinctly human capability that allows one to understand, experience, and share the perspectives, situations, and feelings of another. Eisenberg (1987) explains that empathy
is an emotional response to another’s emotional state that is congruent with that state (Eisenberg, 1987).

If a mentor is to coach a protégé through the problem-solving process, he or she must first earn the right to assist by demonstrating a deep understanding of the issues and emotions experienced. Even if problem-solving appears to be all that is really needed in a given situation, the expression of empathy provides the foundation of trust needed for, collaboration in problem-solving to take place.

In other words, empathy paves the way and is pre-requisite to joint problem solving, because we all need to be heard and understood. When an individual does not perceive that he or she is understood, then advice may be perceived as presumptuous, perhaps patronizing and/or counterproductive, and meaningless at best. However, when a person perceives that he or she is understood on some level, the doorway to influence is opened enough for a foundation for trust to be established. A wise friend once said that relationships can only go as deep as trust goes, and this idea holds true for mentor relationships as well as any other.

Empathy opens the door to trust because the protégé perceives something along these lines: My mentor understands my perspective, has felt a great deal of what I am feeling, and has the benefit of experience and objectivity in regards to my circumstances. I can trust that my mentor cares about my situation because he or she has invested the time and effort to understand. It is SAFE, then, for me to invite him or her into my problem-solving process and to work collaboratively toward a solution.

So what’s the catch? Do not most mentors experience empathy when protégés express grave difficulties? Haven’t we often realized that we have been in their shoes, making empathy a natural response? It is true that desiring or even experiencing empathy is usually not a problem for mentors, and research indicates a link between others-oriented empathy and a willingness to provide mentorship, particularly
psychosocial mentorship (Allen, 2003). However, effectively expressing empathy may be more challenging than experiencing it. To provide a benefit, a mentor’s intent to be empathetic must be effectively perceived by the protégé.

**Effectively Expressing Empathy**

Davis (1990) argues that the ability to empathize cannot be taught or forced but can be facilitated through the development of skills such as self-awareness, confidence, unconditional positive regard, and listening. Perhaps the most challenging task in experiencing and expressing empathy is that of *listening to understand* as opposed to merely listening to hear. A natural internal reaction when listening is to begin crafting a response before a thought, feeling, or situation has been fully expressed by the other party, leading to gaps in communication. To combat the tendency to plan ahead instead of attending to the speaker, the listener can reflect the speaker’s ideas by simply repeating or rephrasing the speaker’s words and asking for clarification. For example, the mentor might say, “It seems like it’s been a very hard day for you, from your breakfast meeting all the way until your meeting with me. Is that what you are saying?” Other common phrases for inviting clarification are:

- *Am I hearing you correctly?*
- *Is that right?*
- *Am I on the right track?*
- *Is that what you are saying?*
- *Is that what you are thinking?*
- *Is that what you are feeling?*

Regardless of the questioning strategy used, it is important for reflection and clarification to occur so the speaker can sense that he or she has been heard. If the listener can recognize the emotions embedded in the speaker’s words and thoughts, an even greater level of understanding can take place between speaker and listener. To
reflect both thought and emotion in the previous example, a mentor might say, “You seem to be feeling really anxious because of all that has happened already today.” Offering reflection and inviting clarification are typically much more effective than giving advice during the initial stages of conversation, so it is important to resist the temptation to offer advice too soon.

Other active listening skills, such as paraphrasing several related thoughts and summarizing lengthier conversations, can deepen the protégé's sense of being understood. Mentors may also choose to self-disclose, sharing their own experiences in an effort to connect and demonstrate empathy with the protégé. When the protégé feels heard and understood on both cognitive and emotional levels, then empathy has been successfully expressed.

**From Empathizing to Problem-Solving**

Although a mentor's expression of empathy is powerful, counselors and therapists have long debated whether empathy and supportive relationship alone can enable the protégé to develop problem-solving skills. This author believes that while empathy lays the foundation, problem-solving skills must be taught, just like any other life skill. Furthermore, the experience and objectivity represented by the mentor and other supporters can be important assets in the problem-solving process. Although at times it is possible for an individual to use only inner resources to solve problems and while one might be able to solve his or her own problems given simply inner resources along with trust and encouragement from others, the addition of a wise partner in problem solving can bring great efficiency and effectiveness to the process.

**The Problem-Solving Process**
Once empathy has been expressed and perceived, the problem-solving process can begin. Many authors have outlined steps to healthy problem solving, and most sequences seem to share several primary components (D’Zurilla, 2009; Watson, 2013). These components are presented and expounded upon here as step-by-step procedures, but may not be limited to this particular sequential order.

1. **Clarify details of the problem**
   The first step includes specifying the issues and their effects and often narrowing down problems to the most urgent or important in the moment. When the protégé is feeling overwhelmed and complaints are broad in nature, the mentor will likely need to encourage the protégé to “give a specific example.” On the other hand, when the protégé’s expressions are too limited to get a full grasp on the issues, the mentor will need to encourage greater exposition with prompts such as, “Tell me more about that” or, “How do you feel about that?”

2. **Brainstorm solutions**
   Through the process of imagining and presenting possible courses of action, both parties offer multiple options but refrain from judgment regarding the value of ideas. In this phase, withholding judgment serves to increase creativity in developing solutions.

3. **Explore consequences and choose a solution**
   Once several ideas have been offered, the mentor and protégé can pursue them by answering the questions, “If this is the chosen course of action, what will be the consequences? And then what? And then what?” It is crucial to consider long-term as well as short-term consequences of potential action plans. Exploring consequences should lead to the ability to choose the most effective solution.
4. **Develop a plan of action and define a first step**
   Once a solution is chosen, clearly and specifically define the plan of action. The first step should be observable and measurable, relatively easy to achieve, and set up for implementation as soon as possible. For example, the person who is experiencing excessive stress and difficulty sleeping could decide to listen to twenty minutes of identified relaxing music that very night, beginning at a specified time and in a specified location.

5. **Implement the plan and follow up**
   When the first step is clearly specified, follow-up is simple and can be initiated with a nonthreatening probe such as, “How did it go?” The parties can then work together, either revising and simplifying step one, or proceeding to the next step in the plan. The element of accountability is important because when the protégé expects the mentor to check on progress made, he or she may feel more compelled to follow through with the plan, knowing that the caring mentor will ask about it in upcoming interactions.

**A Practical Example**

Following is a hypothetical example involving a seasoned music educator mentoring a first-year choir director.

Mentor: *How are things going with your upcoming program?*

Choir Director (CD): *I don’t know. I’m just not sure we are going to be ready.*

Mentor: *So you’re concerned that you won’t be able to prepare the students in time. Is that it?* (Reflecting and clarifying)

CD: *No, well, I don’t know. The students are restless because we’re meeting in the gym while our AC is being repaired, which is taking much longer than expected. No one seems to be into the music – they all just want to...*
goof off. When they do sing, I can’t hear well enough to know what’s happening because of the acoustics. And I don’t think the students like me. They’d rather have last year’s director back.

Mentor: So it sounds like you have lots of things working against you. The temporary space makes it difficult to hear and to keep students on task, and you’re not sure about how to build a good rapport with them under the current circumstances. (Paraphrasing) That must be very frustrating. (Reflecting emotion)

CD: It is. And I worry that I might not be offered a contract next year if this program flops.

Mentor: I can see how you would be stressed by all of that. I remember feeling really concerned during my first year because my students seemed apathetic and weren’t performing very well. It was a scary time for me. (Self-disclosure)

CD: How did you handle it?

Mentor: Not very well, I’m afraid. Lots of trial and error, and I eventually realized that we were all in an adjustment period and some of my perceptions were not accurate. (Self-disclosure) I felt a stress similar to what you’re feeling, I think, but your situation is a little different. (Acknowledging similarities and differences, important in self-disclosure)

What do you think is the most difficult part of this for you?

(Transitioning to problem solving – clarifying the problem)

CD: Probably getting ready for the concert in time. I feel like if they have a good performance, they will start to respect me and we will begin to have a better rapport.
Mentor: *So let’s talk about options.* (Brainstorming) *I know a lot of this feels out of your control, but let’s brainstorm some steps that you could take, whether they’re really reasonable steps or not.*

CD: [Smiling] *I could quit!*

Mentor: *Ok, I know you’re joking, but it really is an option?* (Withholding judgment in brainstorming) *What else?*

CD: *I could try to find another rehearsal space...or maybe do more work in sectionals...or even use my section leaders in a different way, to get them more on board.*

Mentor: *Great, what else?*

CD: *Maybe set up a reward system to keep them focused. Or just practice in the choir room with no AC.*

Mentor: *So what would happen if you practiced in the choir room?* (Exploring consequences)

CD: *I think I could at least hear them better, but they wouldn’t enjoy it at all, and I would lose them because of the heat.*

Mentor: *What would happen if you tried to find another space?* (Exploring consequences)

CD: *I think I would just get frustrated. We are really limited, and I don’t see any other options available. And if I ask, I think I will just be met with more frustration from administration. But maybe if we stay where we are, we could do more work in sectionals and my section leaders might feel more invested. That could help.*

Mentor: *You’ve listed several possible options, including quitting, working differently with section leaders, finding another space, working in the*
choir room, and setting up a reward system. Which one seems best to you? (Choosing a solution)

CD:  *I could try making better use of my section leaders, and they not only could do more work in sectionals but also help me implement a reward system to motivate students to focus.*

Mentor: *And what would happen if you did that?* (Exploring more consequences)

CD:  *I could hear better by working in small groups, and since these students are really competitive, competing against other sections for a reward might really get them working.*

Mentor: *That sounds like a plan with good potential. So what can you do today to get started?* (Defining a first step)

CD:  *I’m going to spend some time thinking about what sort of reward system might work. Then I will present it to the students during rehearsal today and see how they react.*

Mentor: *Great! Call me or stop by tomorrow to let me know how it went and what you might do next.* (Preparing for follow up)

Of course, the previous example is of a primarily professional nature. A similar process can be followed, however, when the obstacle is related to personal issues. Once again, the mentor must always be aware of the limitations of his or her training, ability, and professional ethics, and must refer to healthcare providers when issues extend beyond those boundaries, including but not limited to situations where safety is a factor.

**Problem-Solving as a Life Skill**
Most mentors invest in individuals not just for the short term, but also with the intention of impacting future life decisions. For that reason, it is important for mentors to model and sometimes teach outright the steps to effective problem solving. Much like the old proverb, “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch fish, and you feed him for a lifetime,” it is more desirable to teach effective problem-solving strategies than to only assist as problems arise. Mentors can always be on the lookout for opportunities to assist in problem-solving as well as opportunities to review the process itself after the fact, increasing the likelihood that the protégé will internalize the steps to problem-solving and use them independently.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, a nurturing and empathetic presence, assistance in problem solving, and training in problem-solving skills can powerfully enhance the mentor relationship and have a life-long impact on the protégé. Empathy will pave the way to trust. Trust will open the door to problem solving. And repeated joint problem-solving, along with review of the process, will create a pattern that allows the protégé to face future obstacles with confidence, efficiency, even wisdom. And when that takes place, the rewards are ongoing and often cyclical. I can think of few greater compliments than to hear a former protégé say, “You taught me how to get past the obstacles and meet the challenges in my life, and I am now teaching others to do the same.”

**Karen E. Miller** serves as Professor and Director of Music Therapy at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.


References


