

Transcript

How Can I Be an Effective Mentor?

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Ken Alford, Ph.D.: Well, welcome to this Magna 20 Minute Mentor. For the next 20 minutes, we're going to discuss how you can be an effective mentor. You're the key of this entire project, and so we want to take a few minutes and share some ideas. I'm Ken Alford, currently an associate professor at Brigham Young University.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: And I'm Tyler Griffin, an assistant professor at BYU. And our goal in this 20 minutes is to share with you basically the best mentoring principles and practices. So we're going to try to balance the theory with the practice and still let you have a life so that mentoring doesn't take over everything that you're already expected to accomplish.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: So getting started, please recognize, if you've been asked to be a mentor, your department chair, your dean, is putting a great deal of trust in you. As with most things, it's going to require more time at the start than it will at the end, and so just recognize that. But quite honestly, how you get started will determine, to large measure, how you finish up.

One of the first things you can do is to establish trust very early on. You must keep absolutely strict confidences. Personally, your mentoring of that new faculty member has to be able to have a listening ear that stays with you. From a military standpoint, you need to treat it as if it's classified information. You don't share it. They need to have just a one-on-one, wonderful relationship with you.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: The other thing you need to do as a mentor is you have to diagnose before prescribing. In other words, you can't help them unless you know what they need help with. And you can't assume that one size fits all with your mentor. So you've got to spend enough time listening and observing, before you start talking and demonstrating, to know that you're on target with your mentee.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: You need to define your expectations clearly. Your mentoring relationship with this new faculty member, who is full of hope and ideas and, quite honestly, perhaps a little too much bravado at this point, having just been hired, you need to let them know what's expected.

They need to understand that, while being a faculty member is extremely rewarding, it's hard work, and there will be lots of long hours involved. And you just need to let them know right up front. It's very similar to establishing expectations within your classroom.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: Very good. And with that bravado that sometimes comes with new faculty, it's also mixed in with some tentative respect for your position as a mentor, and they will sometimes assume that you're not accessible. And

they may be a little bit afraid of you. So you've got to be able to make yourself open enough and set the expectation of your openness with them early so that they realize that you're okay, you're a safe person, and you're open to them coming in.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: You also want to build their self-reliance. One of the best things you can do as a mentor is to make yourself irrelevant. If you can, have them reach the point where, ideally within a year, they don't need you for anything. Their teaching is under hand. They have publications in the pipeline. Hopefully, they've even published a place or two. You want to work yourself out of a job. That's your goal.

And so there's a simple four-step kind of process that works with students, but it also works with new faculty members. And the first thing to do is you show them what to do. Take them and actually take the time to show them what you do to prepare to teach, how you keep records on the students and grading statistics and how you write your exams and how you seek out places to publish, those kinds of things. Help them then do the same thing. We'll talk about some additional ideas in this mentor.

But you want to not only show them, but help them get started. It's frightening to start as a new faculty member. They see all of these expectations, and often, they don't know where to begin.

Then you need to, this is probably the hardest step, you have to watch them do it. And coupled with that, you have to let them do it. It's easy to be hands-on sometimes, harder to back off. It's like having children. When they start reaching the point of leaving home, it's hard to let them go, but you have to do it, and you have to reach that point with these new faculty members.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: The other thing to consider is you might be really good in the teaching realm or the scholarship realm. As a mentor, you have to help your mentee know the expectations and succeed to the best of their capacity in each of those three realms, teaching, scholarship, citizenship, which most universities have one form or another in their expectations for tenure. So to show them, then help them, then watch them, then let them, has to apply to all three of those realms, not just your strength.

And also, that's going to mean when you're assessing where they're coming from and what their strengths and weaknesses are, you can then figure out better how to show them or what needs less modeling and more watching in certain areas compared to others. Again, diagnose before you prescribe and before you help in all three of those areas, not just your strength.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: So what we'd like to do now is kind of change gears just a little bit. Let's talk about some dos and some don'ts. These are coming from our experience, as well as we've conducted a literature review, and there's some fairly common and consistent statements and pieces of advice that come from all quarters. And here they are kind of summarized.

The first one is don't overwhelm your mentee. It's easy to sit down the very first time you get together and just lay out your 20 or 30 years as a faculty member. All that's going to do is give them the intellectual and emotional bends. They're going to leave there so overwhelmed that it will seem hopeless. You don't want to go there.

Recognize, you've been doing this so long that it's now second nature to you. They're not. This is, in some cases, possibly the first semester they've ever taught. That rhythm of the semester, where you get locked into that, and the rhythm of a classroom, where if it's a 50-minute class, you can hit 49 or 51 minutes without even checking your watch, they don't have that yet.

And so what you want to do is you want to, I think, look for ways for them to score some early victories, some early victories in the classroom. Help them with maybe some lesson plans. Help them be confident as they get in front of those students. Help them, especially with their first publication, as they're on faculty. Take them a little bit more by the hand to get some early successes. We just can't overestimate the value of an early success.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: So what you do is you discuss the goals with them. So you sit down in each of the areas. What are the expectations when they got hired in teaching citizenship and scholarship? What are the expectations of the department of the university? And discuss goals in each of those areas with them, rather than telling them what they have to do and overwhelming the further.

Liberate them by putting it out on paper and saying, I'll help you. I can help you with this. This is my job, as your mentor, to help guide you through this process, to meet these goals that the university has set for you, these expectations the university has set for you, and the goals you've set for yourself in your own personal scholarship or teaching or citizenship realm.

The next don't is a very simple one. Don't talk too much. Mentors, like Ken was saying, they have so much experience that they want to unload the whole load of hay, so to speak. In this context, a mentor should listen more than talk in the beginning, assess more than prescribe, especially in the beginning. Don't talk too much.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: So what you do want to do then is to ask questions, but most importantly, to listen. The first time, if we could suggest, the first time you sit down with your mentor, don't offer any advice. Just simply listen. Let them spill out to you all of their concerns, all of their frustrations, all of their hopes, all of their desires, all of their goals.

Elicit from them appropriately with some questions of what is it they want from you, because if your idea of mentoring them doesn't match their idea of being mentored, it's going to be an extremely frustrating experience for both of you.

And so one of the hardest things to do as a mentor is just that, just to listen. Now, in maybe a second and follow-on visits, you will have the opportunity to share your years of experience. But again, if we could, when you first meet, let them be in the driver's seat, kind of setting the agenda, because quite frankly, this is for them and not you. You're there as a resource. They're there to learn.

So a third thing we would tell you not to do is don't expect success will just happen. I've seen multiple mentoring relationships where the mentor sits down with the mentee, explains to them what to do, and in their mind, it's perfectly clear. Everybody can see it, you know. Anyone knows that that's exactly what you do, and that's how you teach, and you don't do this, or you do do that in the classroom.

And then they just kind of expect, they've wound up their mentee and send them out into the world and they'll succeed. That's not the way it works in the real world. Very little of what you say will actually sink home at first.

And so you may, as a thought, want to provide them just some bullets after you meet. Hey, you know, these are some things we talked about. This is what I think you are expecting from me. Here's some things I might be able to help. Here's some answers and some resources that you asked. Let me put that down for you, kind of give you a feel for that.

And then if you've got it wrong, it gives them a chance to come back and let you know that, no, you missed it, that isn't what I was trying to say, and what I really wanted was this.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: So on this do side of this don't, do schedule regular meeting times. Have an expectation that this is going to be a formal relationship. We can have some informal mentoring going on, but this is the formal part of the mentoring relationship. And if it's a formal part, it needs a schedule. And so you and your mentee decide what that regular meeting schedule ought to be.

If it's once a week early on, if it's once a month, if it's once a quarter, once a semester, you decide what's going to best meet the needs of that mentee as you help him or her progress through their goals that you've established and set with them.

Now that brings us to the fourth item, don't be too formal. Don't treat it so professionally that they don't feel capable of asking you questions that are just burning inside, but they don't feel like they can ask you because it's not a formal topic related to the work that they're expected to do.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: Odds are, as far as academic rank is concerned, you are a full professor or associate. They're probably an assistant, perhaps even an instructor. That needs to disappear, quite frankly, when you're meeting with them. They will know that. You won't have to say anything.

What you do want to do is you want to just drop in on your mentee. Don't make every time you see them a scheduled meeting. Some of your best experiences can be you just happened to be in the neighborhood, by their office, thought you'd drop in and see how they're doing.

You'll find that if you catch them in this kind of environment, you can often get much freer answers, and you will be able to experience some of the frustrations they're having because, quite frankly, they're having them at the time you happened to have dropped by.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: Or you'll see them walking down the hall with a harried look or stressed look on their face, and just ask them, what's going on?

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: You know, you're in a role to have them be accountable to you. This is kind of touchy. They don't work for you. They don't report to you. You don't establish their pay raises and their evaluations. But it's still an accountability relationship. And I would personally recommend that you make that gently clear early on, that you are expecting them to set goals with you and to follow through on them.

There are elements of this that it is a very professional relationship. And it's a unique experience because you're walking that fine line between friend and mentor. And it is a fine line. And at times, it will vary on both sides of the line. But you do want to help them set goals. They'll have much more success.

Fifth, we would tell you don't give false praise ever. Just don't give false praise. They will see through it. They will discount what you tell them you're after. And you just don't want to put yourself in a position of giving false praise.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: So instead of the false praise, do give specific feedback. It would be kind of like the coach of a basketball team saying, if you don't do better on your free throws this next game, we're going to get beat. Well, that's general. Everybody on the team already knew that, and it's not helpful.

So the specific feedback would be, let's work on free throws, and here are some specific things that you could do to more effectively increase your percentage at the free-throw line.

Same thing with teaching, same thing with scholarships, same thing with citizenship. As you observe them, as you interact with your mentee in these different areas of their work, don't just say, good job, you did a great job, keep it up. You need to teach more effectively. That won't help. That will only discourage. Give them specific things that they can actually work on, things they can do, rather than just get frustrated about.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: If I could mention just briefly, remain positive though. There's no reason to be negative. This is a great environment to be in. It's challenging, but it's wonderful. When you have to provide them specific feedback that may be viewed as negative, do it as soon after the event as possible. This is a setting where time does not make this any better. And so if you see something where they've done something in the classroom or made some cultural faux pas, catch it as soon as you can.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: Very good. And try to sandwich that between some positive feedback as well. The sixth thing, don't do the work for them. Your job is not to make sure they get tenure. Your job is to make sure that they get all of the resources that are necessary for them to be able to accomplish what they need to accomplish to get tenure.

Sometimes mentors feel like a failure if their mentee doesn't actually get tenure or succeed in one of these realms. But you have to let them be an independent person of you. You're an assistant, a coach, a guide, an advisor, a mentor. You're not supposed to do the work for them.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: So what you do want to be is to be their guide. Tyler mentioned that you're their coach. That analogy of you being the football coach is perfect. What does the coach do? The coach gives advice, helps them call plays, but then doesn't get on the field and throw the ball and do the blocks and, you know, try and score the points. The coach has to sit there sometimes, almost literally on their hands, and watch the players play. You have to do the same thing.

Another don't is don't try to clone yourself. This new faculty member is not you. They never will be you. You don't want them to be you. You

don't want to have to compete with yourself. And thank heavens for that. We're all different. Recognize they have strengths you don't. You have strengths they don't. Work with both. You just don't want to try and put them in a situation where you're making a little clone of yourself.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: Which means that you're going to have to get to know them on a much more than just a professional level. You also need to get to know them on a personal level, to one degree or another, to be able to help them become the very best they can be uniquely. So that's the do for number seven is help them build their own unique identity, not yours.

Now, you can absolutely influence and shape and maybe point in certain directions, which you should do, without taking over their identity or taking over their career and trying to make it a follow-up to your career.

Which leads us now to the eighth factor, don't be a one-stop shop. Some mentors will get overwhelmed with trying to be the end-all, be-all, know-it-all for any question, any issue, the mentee might ever come up with. And that will be exhausting, and it won't be helpful to your mentee. We're not trying to create an environment where you're the only one they can come to.

One of the best things you can do as a mentor when they come to you with questions is say, that's a good question. Here's something to consider. But you know who you ought to talk to? And give them a list of a few people or a few resources online that they can turn to.

That's part of becoming a lifelong learner and, in this case, a lifelong instructor and faculty member is to be able to help them find answers to their questions from a variety of sources and to be able to weight out the options based on those sources. Don't be a one-stop shop.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: At the same time, you do want to help your mentee to network. As you go to social gatherings or conferences or faculty meetings, you want to introduce your mentee to people who you know in this field, across the university or college, even support staff. You never know who's going to be helpful to your mentee. And this will allow your mentee to establish relationships outside of your mentorship, again, making yourself irrelevant. But help them because you know these people and they don't.

You also should not expect though your mentee to understand tenure. This is our last don't. As you look at this, you need to recognize that tenure is just a strange and multidimensional animal.

You didn't understand it correctly when you first arrived. They won't either. They think they do, and that's where the danger lies. But they don't

understand the nuances in the system and the cultural quirks that exist, almost certainly, at your institution. Your job is to help them understand the way tenure really works.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: So one thing for you to consider as a mentor is if your mentee does not attain tenure, it may or may not be a reflection on you because what you do want to do now is guide your mentee through the tenure process, don't get tenure for them. Don't guarantee the tenure. But at the end of the day, if they don't get tenure, it better not have been because you didn't help them know all of the nuances and all of the requirements of the process.

If they don't get tenure, it ought to be because they didn't meet the expectations that were laid out by the university, rather than getting stuck in the process of tenure. So that's where you come in. You give them all of the resources that they need to succeed. You show them. You provide all kinds of networking and all these other things we've talked about.

But at the end of the day, it is your mentee who has to do it and has to work through that. And you can't guarantee them success in any of this. You just be their coach, be their guide, be their cheerleader.

Ken Alford, Ph.D.: So the bottom line is it's your job to help your mentee succeed. Good luck in this. Look for creative ways to do this. It can be very satisfying, and we will, quite frankly, tell you it can be frustrating along the way. But you get to help someone succeed in their career choice. We've provided additional resources for you, along with this 20 Minute Mentor, and we wish you all the best of luck.

Tyler Griffin, Ph.D.: We'd love your feedback. Here's our evaluation form, and we wish you all the best as a mentor. Thanks.