

EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP: GUIDING PROFESSIONALS AND PRE-PROFESSIONALS TOWARD SUCCESS

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The business community has been concerned with mentoring young talent in a meaningful way for many years. There also seems to be of late, countless reports in the news lamenting a supposed decline in the skills and training of young professionals. These concerns seem to permeate every field we might examine, and the blame for this shortfall assumes almost every guise imaginable. While we as musicians may not be bustling members of the business community, I think we, in higher education, do deal with the most important commodity in any marketplace - we deal with people. I am a fan of stock-market pundit Jim Carmer, and in his autobiographical *Confessions of a Street Addict* (Simon and Schuster, 2002), the process of mentoring at Goldman Sachs, the giant financial firm, is laid bare alongside stories detailing the absolute necessity for mentoring. When millions of dollars, even billions, are on the line, it is probably best if traders making the buy and sell decisions have an adequate understanding of the system. This idea is expounded in the book to include much of Cramer's trading career, and serves to elucidate the premise that "book learning" is not enough information when we deal with human beings.

I use the business model not to tout the wonders of our financial system, but rather to try and stress the importance of mentoring in the field of teaching. Too often, we see students and teachers, and not the priceless commodity they represent. A college professor in music will most likely be a teacher of teachers, so the ramifications of job performance are as critical as the financial process of compounding interest. I also use the business model to highlight the idea that mentoring *after* someone is employed is in every way more important than the training that allowed someone to secure the position in the first place. We learn the skills needed to get a job in school, but many times we learn how to do our jobs on the job. Mentoring, then, is essential to guarantee successes.

As I draw from my own experiences, and consider all of the mentors I have been fortunate enough to have thus far in my career, I seem to always find a similar thread, no matter what area of my training was involved. My best mentors allowed me to trip and stumble - and sometimes they even deftly manipulated situations to ensure that this happened - to provide room to grow and learn, only stepping in if I was about to completely fall. In retrospect, I strongly feel that these mentors knew what I have come to embrace as a mantra. Students and colleagues made it to us, so the skill is there. As mentors we need to decide what could not have been learned before they come to "the job." The best performance analogy would be that someone can perfect playing in tune with themselves in a practice room, but the only place to perfect playing in tune in an ensemble is in that ensemble and learning where to deviate.

When we hire colleagues, (or graduate assistants) we know each candidate interviewed could do the job well. Everyone plays well, teaches well, and has earned the respect and admiration of at least several references given their level. This is why mentoring is so crucial. There is a separate skill set, usually unique to specific situations, that a new colleague, or graduate assistant is incapable of preparing for before actually arriving on

the job. The question then becomes how do we best work with these new colleagues and students? As a young faculty member in a large college of music, I will break down my thoughts on this in three areas: colleagues, graduate assistants and undergraduates.

When mentoring new colleagues, it is best to provide a "check-up" system in addition to mentoring towards tenure and promotion. The check-up system means periodically contact the new faculty member to see how things are going. Encourage them to come to you when they have problems, but still check on them every few weeks. As music faculty members, we can tend to be professionally isolationist - probably because we all developed skills by spending so much time alone practicing. New faculty might sometimes feel awkward asking advice on what they view as a small detail. However, anyone who has been through a grade appeal, retirement plan conversion, or merit documents knows that these seemingly minor issues are at the very least confusing, yet have dire consequences if not done correctly. In fact, many young professionals might not even know how to select an insurance or retirement plan for themselves or their family, and this is especially true if graduate assistants are offered similar benefit packages.

My best mentors in higher education have also been central in keeping me from being spread too thin. It is critical to mentor young colleagues in ways to say "no." Often, young faculty attempt to do everything, and need redirection toward items that carry weight toward tenure and promotion. The perspective of senior faculty is imperative for this purpose, as younger professionals do not always know the process. It is also not time consuming to take on the mentorship role. The best mentoring happens over coffee or lunch - things we do anyway.

In my current position in the College of Musical Arts at Bowling Green State University I work with a wide range of students, each in need of a different type of mentoring. Working with graduate assistants is quite different than working with colleagues. When young faculty members are assigned graduate teaching assistants, it adds a great deal of stress. As a young college teacher, my first year required sole supervision of six graduate assistants and an additional three who were shared with another faculty member. It is hard enough to keep afloat when first starting a job, and then throw in nine graduate assistants on top of that. It can become daunting. I learned quickly from the mistakes I made mentoring these aspiring professionals.

When working with graduate assistants, we must allow them to make mistakes and only intervene when a mistake would cause great difficulty. Until they suffer their own shipwreck, they will not likely grab the life vest you provide. It is also important to remember that all of our graduate assistants might not be "just like we were" when we were graduate assistants. We might have been told once by a supervisor to complete a task, but that does not mean everyone is the same. With the pressing demands of our own jobs and lives, we might think we have been very clear about certain items, when in fact we were thinking in mathematical shorthand. We can start at A and arrive at C quite well because we are practiced, but our graduate students need to see the roadmap from A to B *and then* to C. We can't leave out steps and assume things will be done correctly. When I examined my early difficulties with graduate assistants, my lack of clarity was often the problem. Now that I seem to be overly simplistic, it is amazing how few problems are created.

It is a primary concern that I educate graduate assistants about the "university process" which includes ordering texts for courses, grade appeals, late registrations, evaluations and syllabus construction. This teaches graduate assistants that there is a process for everything, and as soon as you deviate from the process, something will go wrong. It is here that I allow graduate students to make mistakes. When a GA drops the ball on a syllabus policy or a late registration, I as supervisor can correct the issue with a single form and a signature. It causes stress for the GA because they have to explain to the student(s) involved how the mistake happened and the corrective measures taken for remedy. I have found that in the first semester, a graduate assistant who makes these types of mistakes does not repeat them. It reinforces patterns of behaviors that apply across a wide range of professional situations.

Another successful method I have found is allowing graduate assistants to maintain ownership over portions of the courses they teach. I construct the course policy, including grade scales, attendance, and guidelines for content, but I allow the graduate assistant to create the course schedule, projects and maintain some leeway of content in specific areas where they may have expertise. Ownership is a powerful motivator, and in many cases, they will place extra effort in making sure everything is at its best. This also allows the GA to refine their ideal content and schedule in subsequent semesters, which closely emulates what they will do professionally after graduation. They learn that even the best effort has glitches the first time and will need to be modified.

Mentoring undergraduates is perhaps the most difficult task we face in higher education. The undergraduate education forces students to be spread very thin, so they are most likely not as focused in our specific area as we would hope. This is not a negative situation, however. Learning basic knowledge in multiple areas is the purpose of an undergraduate education. The time to specialize is in graduate school, so the seeming lack of directness of curriculum is what makes mentoring these students so difficult. If the premise of "what can you not learn before the job" holds true, we can find some interesting and effective ways to prepare these pre-professionals for the field.

Given the one-track dialogue of skill building and fact finding at this level, mentoring becomes concerned with teaching students what questions to ask. I do not mean to imply this process is void in the academic curriculum, but the manifestation as students prepare to enter the workforce is much different. Students need to know how to compare salaries in differing demographics, choose between two seemingly equivalent jobs based on retirement plans or health care benefits, or simply be able to evaluate programs based on their own merit. These items are usually not covered in the curriculum in any depth because there is so much musicianship and pedagogy to cover. Professional training must be the primary focus, but these peripheral components can't be ignored. The most readily available means to accomplish this goal is through student organizations or student chapters of professional organizations.

Every student should belong to their professional organization(s) before entering their profession. When we supplement the curricular offerings with the advantages of mentoring through professional organizations, we are teaching students that there is a system in place to help with every facet of their job. They can begin to learn what questions to ask simply through observation. If a student reads the professional

association journals, they will wed pedagogy and practice. It will allow for an awareness of trends in the profession that often lie far beyond trends in the training for a profession. The support of these programs, and donations of resources and energy to students through this organized medium may be one of the best uses of our time mentoring undergraduates.

Mentoring is a critical component at any level in any profession. There are many ways to mentor, but the key ingredient for graduate students and young professionals is allowing small mistakes to happen. For undergraduates, simply encouraging professional behaviors and giving structured time to groups beyond the curriculum will yield positive results. If the business community is so concerned with on the job training, so should musicians, as again, we deal with people - by far the most important commodity.

About the Author

Kenneth Thompson is currently an Assistant Professor in the College of Musical Arts at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in conducting and literature, band methods, supervises graduate teaching assistants and works with the student teacher program. He is music director and conductor of the New Music Ensemble, conducts ensembles in the band area, and is artistic director and conductor of the Toledo Symphony Youth Orchestra.