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WHERE'S THE CHEMISTRY IN MENTOR-MENTEE ACADEMIC RELATIONSHIPS? TRY SPEED MENTORING!

By Professor Ronald A. Berk, PhD

A recent review of nearly 90 publications on faculty mentoring over the past decade by Lottero-Perdue and Fifield (2010) indicated there is considerable variability in how mentoring is defined and the programs are executed in practice. However, at the heart and soul of all mentoring programs is the mentor-mentee relationship.

What's so special about this relationship in the context of higher education? After all, it's just the pairing of a wiser, more experienced, sage-type professor with a newbie or less experienced, sageless junior faculty member or a student. The mentor's primary function is to show the mentee the academic ropes, that is, the teaching, research, service, or clinical nuts and bolts—to serve as a human advisor-career version of CliffsNotes®. Dynamics of Mentor-Mentee Relationships.

In reality, that relationship is a bit more complicated, like friend and romantic relationships. This section dissects the relationship to reveal its most basic innards: (1) top 10 components of the relationship and (2) the personal connection.

Top 10 Components of the Relationship

Here are the top 10 components of each mentor-mentee relationship extracted from the literature to date (Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005; Lottero-Perdue & Fifield, 2010):

1. Mentor's role, which can be teacher, counselor, advisor, sponsor, collaborator, resource, and/or advocate
2. Mentee's role, which can involve requesting feedback, asking questions, sharing experiences, observing teaching or research, and collaborating
3. Management of relationship
4. Mentor's expertise
5. Academic interests of parties involved
6. Number of participants (one-on-one, multiple mentors or mentees, group)
7. Frequency of communication (face-to-face, e-mail, TM, and/or phone)
8. Duration of relationship
9. Intensity of relationship (serious, casual, caring, nurturing); and
10. Chemistry of relationship



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All of these factors contribute to the uniqueness and success or failure of each relationship. However, rarely are all 10 taken into account in creating a profile of each relationship in formal mentoring programs.

The Personal Connection

While the substantive foundation of the relationship is the experience, knowledge, skills, and/or wisdom of the mentor (Berk et al., 2005), it's the unique *personal connection or chemistry* between mentor and mentee that is critical to the success and longevity of the relationship (Jackson, Palepu, Szalacha, Caswell, Carr, & Inui, 2003). That element is essential for most all in-depth, meaningful relationships; it's not essential for superficial, fly-by-night, or popular, short-term, illicit celebrity relationships.

What happens when the chemistry is missing? If the mentee is (a) intimidated, frightened, or uncomfortable in any way in the relationship, (b) gulps down an anti-nausea medication before each meeting, or (c) simply ends up with a mentor resembling Freddy Krueger or Dog the Bounty Hunter, the relationship is DOOMED! In other words, it's dead in the water or some other fluid, regardless of the substantive expertise the mentor could provide. The emotional intelligence, especially interpersonal skills, of both mentor and mentee is a crucial determinant of the chemistry. That's why these relationships are non-formulaic and often quite messy.

Matching Strategies to Create the Relationship

How do you match mentors and mentees? Formal mentorship programs across a variety of departments and disciplines in institutions worldwide use three major approaches: (1) administrator randomly assigns mentees to mentors, (2) administrator selectively matches them on criteria such as content area, research topics, clinical specialty, career direction or choices, and/or personal attributes, or (3) administrator permits mentees to pick their mentors usually based on criteria similar to 2, if they have access to that information. In some cases, mentors and mentees find one another and create their own relationships.

While there are advantages and disadvantages to each of these methods, the primary focus, in almost all cases, is on the substantive characteristics of the relationship related to teaching (Chism, Fraser, & Arnold, 1996), research (Mundt, 2001; Waitzkin, Yager, Parker, & Duran, 2006), service (Smith, Whitman, Grant, Stanutz, Russett, & Rankin, 2001), or clinical (Benson, Morahan, Sachdeva, & Richman, 2002) topics, and professional and personal issues (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002; Levy, Katz, Wolf, Sillman, Handlin, & Dzau, 2004). Unfortunately, there is no evidence specifically favoring the effectiveness of any one of these approaches in terms of mentoring program outcomes over any other. Further, none of them systematically accounts for the chemistry or personal component. Yet, many mentoring relationships deteriorate or end abruptly due to a lack of chemistry.



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One strategy to test the chemistry between potential mentor-mentee matches as well as consider the preceding substantive criteria is *speed mentoring*. It is based on the extremely popular “speed-dating” approach to find matches for people seeking serious, long-term relationships. The next two sections examine (1) the characteristics of speed dating and research evidence pertinent to chemistry in relationships, and then (2) how those characteristics can be adapted to create matches for meaningful mentor-mentee relationships.

Speed-Dating Prototype

Speed dating was created by Rabbi Yaacov Deyo for the purpose of assisting Jewish singles meet and marry (Deyo & Deyo, 2003). (*Note:* This occurred while Yente the “match-maker” from *Fiddler on the Roof* was on sabbatical.) Yaacov and his wife Sue founded SpeedDating® (www.speeddating.com) in Los Angeles. The first actual formal event took place at Pete’s Café in Beverly Hills, CA, in 1998 (Brown, 2003). No one knows for sure how many matches were made or whether any guys were tasered for inappropriate behaviors.

Since the late ‘90s, SpeedDating® and numerous other commercial speed-dating services have popped up all over the world. You have probably seen these services and events popping on popular TV shows, such as *Sex and the City*, *60 Minutes II*, *NCIS*, *Law & Order*, *Monk*, and *Psych*, and in movies like *Hitch* and *40-Year-Old Virgin*.

Why has speed dating been so successful? It is a very efficient, effective, unthreatening, unpressured, and comfortable activity to meet a match compared to the alternatives of bars, clubs, parties, or other evil venues. Studies of first impressions have found that that most people can pick a match in 30 seconds to 3 minutes (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005a).

How does speed dating work? Here are the most common characteristics for the heterosexual version:

1. Men are seated at individual tables in a room not larger than the Roman Coliseum.
2. Women rotate from table to table on “short dates” with each guy.
3. Each random encounter usually lasts from 3 to 8 minutes, after which a bell rings to signal the women to move on to the next table. (*Note:* The Deyo’s original design involved a fast, fun, 7-minute round-robin event.)
4. When this round-robin process is complete, participants submit requests for contact information of those individuals that want to meet again.
5. The organizer of the event analyzes the requests for matches and then sends contact information only to those couples.

These speed-dating events have been extended to a variety of niches, including specific age ranges, ethnic groups, religious groups, and gays and lesbians. Variations of these events are also conducted online (e.g., www.speeddate.com, www.hurrydate.com, www.eightminutedating.com).



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This strategy is an efficient procedure to match random people quickly based on first impressions. The research evidence suggests that these impressions have relationship staying power (Finkel, & Eastwick, 2008; Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 2006; Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005b; Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007). Imagine if the participants were given professional and personal information in advance to add a substantive component to the encounter.

A Proposed Model for Speed Mentoring

How can these speed-dating characteristics be adapted to create mentoring relationships with appropriate chemistry? Previous research has suggested *speed mentoring* as a potential strategy to improve the match between mentors and mentees (Cook, Bahn, & Menaker, in press; Kahn & Greenblatt, 2009). However, little evidence exists to support its effectiveness. One eclectic, step-by-step procedure for executing speed mentoring is proffered below:

1. Mentors are seated at the tables arranged esthetically in a nice room larger than a broom closet. They have a list of all mentees with pertinent bio information.
2. Mentees are provided with a list of mentors and bio information in advance, such as content expertise or discipline, clinical specialty, research interests, teaching approach or methods, and selected publications, presentations, and grants.
3. Mentees prepare a few standard questions to ask each potential mentor. Answers can be compared across mentors and analyzed after the event.
4. Each mentor-mentee encounter is set at 10 minutes.
5. A bell rings (What else? A gong?) at the end of each session, after which each mentor and mentee are given one minute to jot down notes on their encounter, the amount of time it took to make a yes or no decision, and a match preference rating of 0–4 (0 = No Way, 1 = Barely Possible Match, 2 = Good Match, 3 = Very Good Match, 4 = Excellent Match).
6. A bell rings again after one minute and each mentee rotates to the next mentor.
7. Once all close encounters of the mentor-mentee kind have been completed, they turn in their lists with their times and preference ratings.
8. The faculty organizing committee (FOC), similar to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), meets to review the preferred matches of each mentor and mentee. Criteria include:
 - a. Ratings of 0–4 for mentor-mentee pairs
 - (1) 3 or 4 ratings should be given the highest priority
 - (2) Mentees' ratings should be weighted more heavily than mentors' ratings (Zerzan, Hess, Schur, Phillips, & Rigotti, 2009)
 - b. Areas of content expertise, research, and/or clinical specialty
 - c. Gender, ethnicity, and other demographics



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9. Matches should be communicated to everyone within two days, if possible. Every mentee should have a mentor. Some mentors may have more than one mentee. (*Note:* If there are faculty members who are not chosen by any mentees [0 rating], they should not be assigned mentees by default. They may have the interpersonal skills of a swamp rat. Their mentoring relationships could mean disaster regardless of how knowledgeable they were.)
10. Periodic evaluations of the mentorship experience should be conducted every six months using the Mentorship Profile Questionnaire and Mentorship Effectiveness Scale (Berk et al., 2005; downloads available on www.ronberk.com), the Faculty Mentoring Program Worksheet (Lottero-Perdue & Fifield, 2010), or similar instruments to furnish the mentor with formal formative feedback. Adjustments can then be made, if necessary.

Conclusions

Over the past decade, mentoring programs have been developed in most academic departments, especially in the health professions, and in a variety of forms. Given the importance of the mentor's role to guide, support, and pass on the tricks-of-the-trade to mentees, the preceding approach is one way to balance the mentee's role in picking the right mentor to realize the academic and career potential of the relationship.

Why consider speed mentoring? Here are half a dozen reasons:

1. It takes into account all of the professional, demographic, and personal characteristics of the alternative matching methods
2. It systematically incorporates the less tangible "chemistry" ratings of both participants to minimize swamp rat syndrome
3. It can be executed in an "experimental," nonthreatening, open environment compared to a possibly intimidating, one-on-one, first-time encounter in an office
4. It weighs in the characteristics and mentor preferences of the mentees as opposed to just considering the attributes of the mentor
5. Mentees have the opportunity for test encounters with any number of potential mentors, ranging from five to slightly less than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir
6. It can be applied to faculty-student advising, mentoring programs in the workplace, and other professional relationship structures

Research on the effectiveness of speed mentoring is required to establish its viability as a matching procedure. However, since there is no differential evidence on the effectiveness of the alternatives and it is inclusive of the information they use, it is certainly worth serious consideration.



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Professor Ronald A. Berk

Ronald A. Berk, Ph.D., is professor emeritus, biostatistics and measurement, and former assistant dean for teaching at The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA. He is a fulltime speaker and writer.

rberk@son.jhmi.edu

www.ronberk.com and blogs at <http://ronberk.blogspot.com>



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