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Essay on starting off a mentoring relationship

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As someone who runs a faculty development center serving over 18,000 graduate students, postdocs and faculty members, the most common complaint I hear is: "I'm not getting the mentoring I need." There are variations on this theme: "there's no mentoring at my institution," "I was matched with a mentor but the person is too busy to meet with me," "every time I ask for help, I get shamed," or "I've never had a mentor."

Any way you slice, I find myself constantly surprised by the fact that most senior professors readily acknowledge that mentoring is critically important to success on the tenure-track and yet, mentoring means very different things to different people and most new faculty members feel like they are not getting what they need.

I'm offering this series as a way to start bridging the divide between those would-be mentors who think mentoring is important and those who desperately want and need to be mentored. While I've offered a previous series aimed for new faculty mentees I want to dedicate this series to tenured faculty members who will be responsible for acting as a mentor to new faculty in the 2013-14 academic year.

I'll start this week by describing the best way to get off to a great start as a mentor. Over the next four weeks, I'll cover the following: 1) a powerful framework to teach mentees that will put them in the driver's seat, 2) how to be a coach (instead of a guru), 3) how to invest in people's sense of belonging in a powerful way up front that will pay off dividends in terms of future retention, and 4) how to create structures for community, peer support and accountability for research and writing.

First things first: How do YOU understand mentoring?

If you are going to serve as a mentor, it's important to clarify your own assumptions about new faculty needs and institutional responsibility for meeting them. If you're a sink or swim type, it's time to either let that go or step out of the role of being a mentor because ignoring new faculty and/or shaming them when they try to get their needs met isn't helpful. In other words, in order to be an effective mentor it's important to understand that more than 90 percent of new faculty members say they weren't fully prepared in graduate school to become a professor, and want and need guidance in navigating the next stage of their careers, a new institutional environment, and the tenure process.

That means: 1) new faculty members have a wide variety of needs, 2) it's normal to have needs, 3) you don't personally have to meet every need, and 4) the most effective mentoring you can do is to support new faculty members in identifying their needs and figuring out how to get them met by tapping into both on- and off-campus resources.

When people arrive in a new city to work at a new college or university, please keep in mind that this is stressful for them. Picking up and moving your entire family to a new location brings with it certain familial stressors. And arriving alone carries a different group of stressors. The point is that most people in the midst of a move are not operating at their highest potential because moving has a way of knocking you down a few rungs on Maslow's hierarchy. At first, those new faculty are just trying to get their stuff from one place to another, settle in whomever they've brought along with them, and get their office/lab up and running.

Knowing that the primary need at this time is settling into space, don't compound the transitional stress by not being prepared to receive the new faculty member. Have his or her office ready by arrival time. Ask new hires if they have what they need. Provide them with whatever information will help them to get up and running quickly. And realize that this is one of those moments where actions speak far

That's a nice way of saying that a common complaint we hear from new faculty is that their departments were not ready to receive them, their offices weren't ready for them to move into, promised equipment hadn't been ordered, and/or they were left in a new space alone to figure out how to navigate a large and complex bureaucracy in the middle of the summer. Don't add to their stress by not having a place for them to go or not being prepared for their arrival.

Space is hugely important to new faculty members because it holds significant symbolic value. In one of my early appointments I was assigned an office in a remote area of campus known as "death row." And it was straight up cinder block, no windows, and bad florescent lighting. In this area, I was separated from the rest of the department and the kinds of relationship-building, daily interactions that occurred in this highly collegial division. As a newly minted Ph.D., the location and isolation of the office sent a powerful message that wasn't positive.

Sometimes these situations can't be avoided due to space restrictions. If so, it's OK to acknowledge that the situation is sub-optimal and to make sure that the new person knows that there are plenty of ways to connect with their colleagues and become part of the intellectual life of the department. Only after people become stabilized in their basic needs is it wise to move in the direction of identifying and meeting higher order needs (more about that in the next few weeks).

I'm not sure how to say this delicately, but it's not uncommon for new faculty members transitioning from graduate student (or post-doc) to their first tenure-track position to be in a state of financial constraint. At the same time, moving is costly and institutional moving packages often barely cover the costs of a do-it-yourself move. This can make it difficult to wait long periods of time for reimbursements and/or access to start up funds. So if you are in a position to move paperwork along, do so. If you're not, don't hesitate to ask your new mentee: do you have any questions about how to file for reimbursements or who in the department can help you navigate this process?

If you have new faculty coming into your department and or you've been assigned / volunteered to mentor someone new, this week I challenge you to:

- 1) Take two minutes, close your eyes, and remember what it felt like to walk into your first department to start your first tenure-track job.
- 2) Give the new person a quick phone call to see how they are settling in.
- 3) Ask directly about needs in terms work space, or what has not yet arrived.
- 4) If something is awry, work toward helping to resolve it quickly and without incident.
- 5) Say something nice (this goes a long way to building the foundation of your relationship): you're happy they are joining the department, you greatly look forward to learning more about their work,

you're delighted to be serving them in a mentoring capacity as they transition into the department, etc...

6) Set up a time to meet face-to-face on campus after they get settled in.

Why not give it a try? A few thoughtful and intentional first steps this week can go a long way toward setting a positive foundation for this important relationship.

Peace and positive mentoring,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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