

## Editorial

# Mentoring the Mentors - A Case for Grooming Role Models

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## Editorial

Mentorship is a bidirectional process of human relationship that embodies the concept of synergism between the mentor (usually the more experienced partner) and the protégée or mentee (who is usually the less experienced partner). Like any other relationship, the purpose of this association is to serve both partners; it meets the need for personal growth and 'legacy' for the mentor and the need for personal growth and professional development for the mentee. Intuitively, the successful execution of such a relationship should translate into much higher achievement than either partner could attain on their own; yet, too many mentoring relationships have succumbed to perceived competing agendas, lack of commitment, and personality clashes. Medical schools and residency training programs are particularly vulnerable to poor training outcomes if the role modeling offered by teaching faculty members is not well received by the students and trainees [1-3].

Mentoring goes beyond developing core competencies; it paves the path towards a successful career *via* role-modeling, which should include inspirational motivation [4]. Despite the emphasis on developing core competencies and faculty development strategies, several mentoring relationships fail! Some authors have identified style incompatibility as the root of the problem [5]. Others have identified several characteristics of mentors and mentees that lead to an unpleasant break-up. Darling described four distinct types of mentors who fail their mentees [6]. First, the 'avoiders' who remain inaccessible for advice and support; these mentors typically do not respond to e-mails, do not return phone calls, and are not available in the office during posted hours. Understandably, the mentees feel ignored and unimportant. Second, the 'dumpers' who believe that the responsibility of learning and acquiring knowledge resides entirely with the mentee and they bare no obligation to facilitate or guide; these mentors generally expect mentees to function at an expert level without leading them to that level and blame the mentee for not succeeding. Third, the 'blockers' who lack the courage to let the

protégée run with an idea; these mentors' micromanage attempts at success or withhold critical pieces of information similar to giving someone a recipe for a great cuisine and purposely leaving out the key ingredient. Fourth, the 'criticizers' who continually minimize the mentee's achievement; these mentors undermine the mentees with peers and superiors and compromise their growth.

On the other hand, it is only appropriate to emphasize that mentees/protégées represent the other half of the equation in the relationship. Barker documented the two characteristics of mentees that can be detrimental to the relationship [7]. First, the 'manipulator' whose association with the mentor is only to reap the benefit of the mentor's position in the organizational hierarchy; these mentees seek only the positional power of the mentor and are not interested in learning the trait themselves. Second, the 'jealous' mentee who is envious of the mentor's position; these mentees compromise the mentor's position and authority *via* backdoor conversations that damage the mentor's reputation.

Many leaders in the professional world, including medicine, recognize the importance of mentorship. Whether it is more relevant and essential in today's world of informatics is settled. In a faculty survey from 24 United States medical schools, faculty members with mentors had significantly higher career-satisfaction scores than those without mentors (mean score, 62.6 vs. 59.5 on a scale from 20-100;  $p < 0.003$ ) [8]. The focus now is on developing and establishing good mentoring practices such that complications resulting from bad mentor-mentee relationships can be minimized. The core competencies are a result, not the goal of scholarship and leadership [9]. Using mentorship as a teaching and training strategy highlights the characteristics of good mentors, [10] or defines a successful or failed mentoring relationship [11]. A systematic review of mentoring in academic medicine identified areas of research such as the effect of mentoring on career development, productivity of formal versus informal mentoring, personality and behavioral constructs, and multifaceted programs *versus* single component strategies [12]. The review was unable to offer any practical recommendations to guide mentors in doing a better job or to guide mentees in selecting a mentor because of a lack of evidence. However, the need for new programs for training effective mentors was highlighted.

From a practical standpoint, the mentorship programs need to focus on building relationships that minimize the risk/benefit ratio. In other words, it is prudent to expect that not all relationships will succeed because human errors are inevitable. However, suppose the program design can keep such failures to a minimum and maximize benefits. In that case, the program's overall success is likely to produce an ever-increasing cadre of mentors who have every motivation to leave

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a legacy by paying forward. As a career coach, I have listened to many stories of failed and successful mentorships, and I noticed a common theme. Both successes and failures are a direct result of behaviors. Therefore, many development programs focus on identifying and modifying behaviors towards a better outcome. Nevertheless, these development strategies do not seem to stick; people default to deeply ingrained habits sooner or later. I propose a 'foundation first' approach for personal/faculty development [13]. The mentor-mentee relationship, albeit a highly privileged and unique kind of leadership, is not exempt from basic principles of the human condition. The 'foundation first' principle dictates the development target to be the primary system of (non-negotiable) values. Fundamentally, the mentors' behavior and its impact on the relationship is the 'outside' phenomenon, which is merely a reflection of the 'inside', dictated by the mentor's value system. This human condition is depicted in Figure 1. Like all other human beings, mentors consciously or subconsciously hold a particular value system that has developed over time through their own life experiences. Inherently, those value systems (the inside) need to be protected! Therefore behaviors (the outside) are designed to guard those values. It is essential to realize that behaviors can result from active choices, but if they are not made, they are chosen by the subconscious system of values. Whereas behaviors can be chosen - the consequence of behaviors is governed by principles. For example, a person who chooses to be deceitful and self-centered cannot expect respect and trust in any relationship because all they can choose is the act of deceit or selfishness - not the impact of that action on the relationship. Intuitively, many development programs focus on modifying these behaviors so that relationships can flourish. Literature suggests specific behavioral targets to foster high-quality mentor-mentee relationships [7,11] (Figure 2).

These interventions seem like a good idea on cursory evaluation because behaviors can be chosen and, therefore, can be modified. However, these approaches miss a critical human condition! Behaviors - the outside can be chosen, but they are not independent of the values - the inside. The default behavior always guards the system of values. Consequently, when behaviors are modified as suggested by the strategies in Figure 2, they are successful and fruitful at the outset. However, if these behaviors are not aligned with the inside system of values, they eventually take the default position of reflecting values. When the system of values is derived from societal status, personality

ethic, and contemporary success, the behavior defaults to protecting these values and leads to a reputation of being phony or superficial which is detrimental to any relationship. Examining the toxic mentor behaviors cited by Darling in the context of the human condition clarifies this phenomenon explicitly. If the mentor's system of values resides in the importance of the position of power, maintaining superiority, winning at all cost (including the mentee) mentality, and worry of being found out - then clearly, it is easy to understand why a mentor would avoid returning phone calls or e-mails, not guide through a problem and dump for the mentee to figure out, minimize the mentee's achievements, or try to clone the mentee because their self is the only worthwhile entity. To take this concept further, when the proposed interventions in Figure 2 are utilized for such mentors - the sequence of events is entirely predictable. Being a mentor is an essential aspect of the mentor's resume and provides a profile in society and status in an organization (the personality ethic), and is very important for the mentor. This is a good reason for the mentor to focus on modifying their behaviors and strive to be available for the mentee. They may also carve out time from a busy schedule to sit with the mentee periodically, monitor progress, and provide some low-hanging fruit of opportunities such as committee appointments, etc. However, in the long run this commitment is too much for the primary value of being important in an organization and being identified as a mentor to juniors for positional advancement. The obligations and behavioral modifications are simply not worthwhile. At this point, the behavior starts to match the values, and since natural laws govern the consequence of behavior, the relationship gets destroyed; for the mentor, the primary goal of the relationship is most likely already served. For the mentee, the mentor is found out! "What you are shouts so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you say" - Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The good news is that it's not just the behavior that can be chosen; the values system can also be chosen! Like all human beings, mentors most likely do not choose to be superficial and self-centered and have not consciously decided to hold positional power, socioeconomic status, and appealing personality as the most dearly held values in their lives. The most likely scenario is that the current societal system of competition, us *versus* them, getting ahead at all costs and networking took away the opportunity for introspection, reflection, and making a well-informed decision regarding what is important. Indeed, the rat-race system of the professional world today has focused on personality ethics and behaviors rather than character building and principles. The contention of the 'foundation first' approach is not that contemporary development programs teach superficiality and phony behavior. The charge is that these programs assume that the 'inside' value system is intact and modifications of behaviors will align the behaviors with the values. This assumption has led the focus of the programs to be the behaviors - the 'outside' and not the values. The 'foundation first' proposes to provide tools for introspection by mentors and raise self-awareness regarding the system of values. Inevitably, this should lead to discovering self, values, and what is really important. This approach usually leads to a paradigm shift for the mentors (Figure 3).

Once the human condition of ethics and its impact on relationships is clear to the mentor (and the mentee), a choice must be made. Is a change needed in the paradigm? Does the value system need repair? As these questions are answered, behavior modification is rather automatic, albeit some skills training may be required. "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act; it is a habit" - Aristotle.

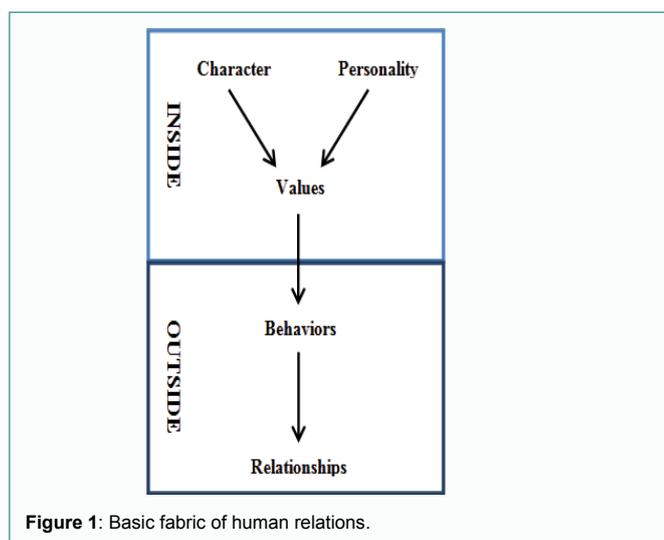
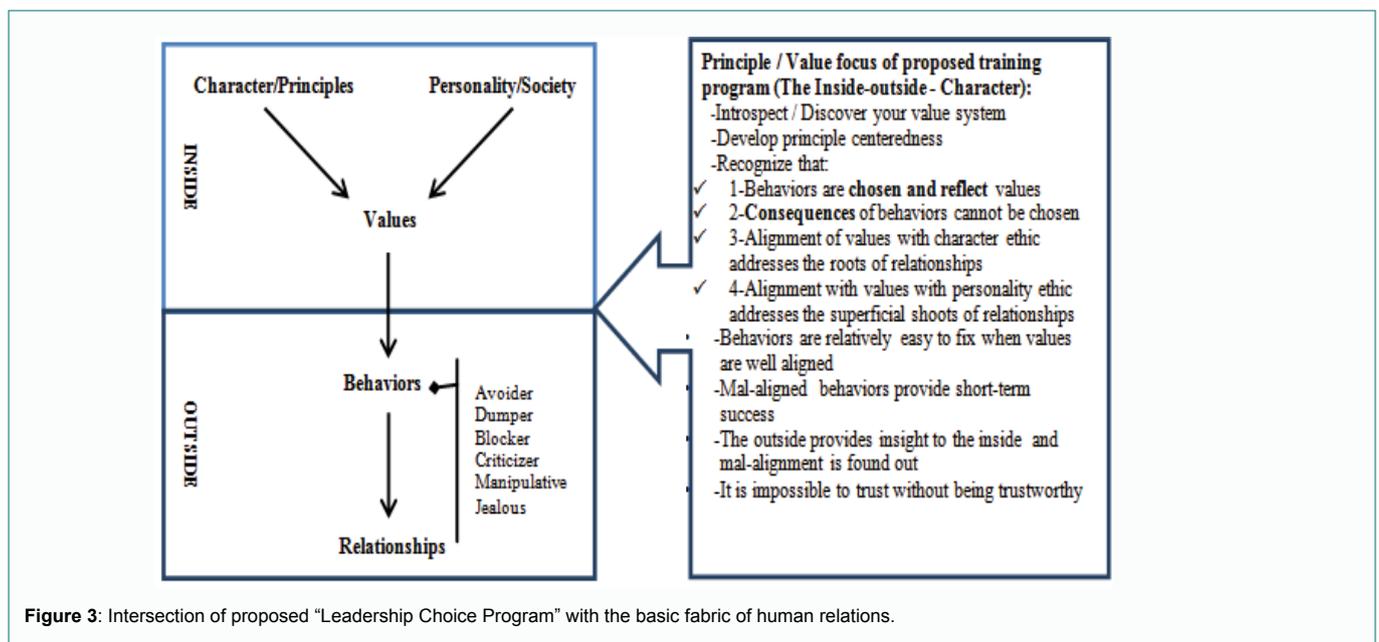
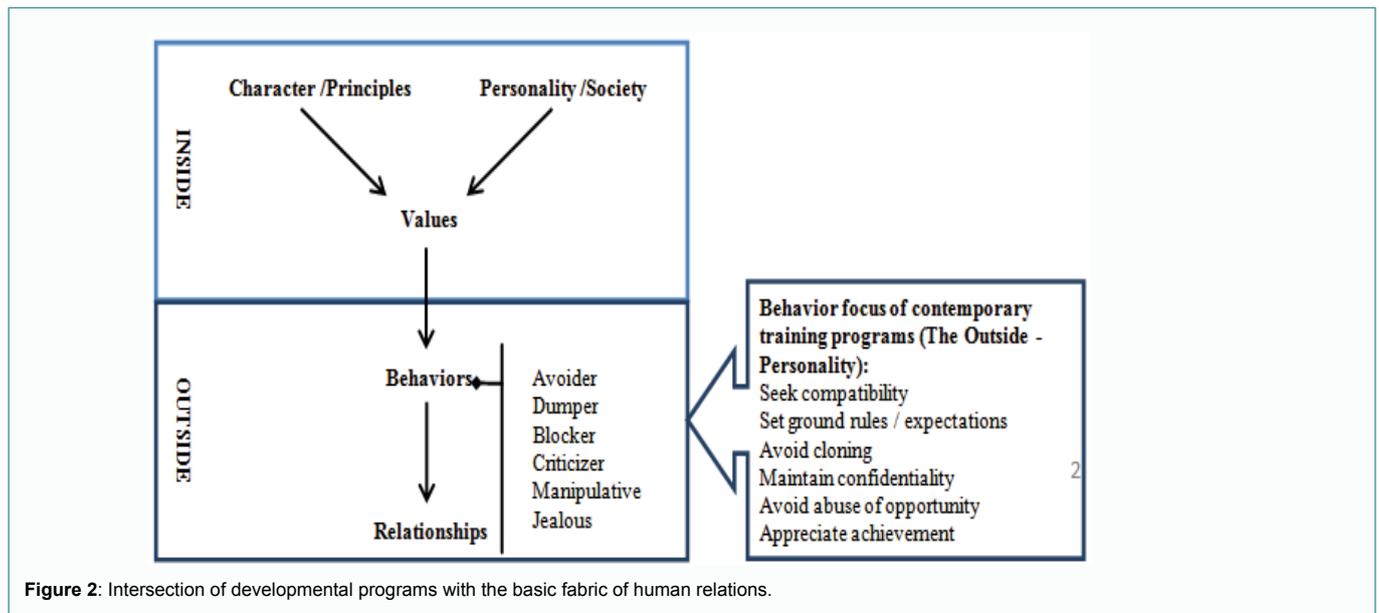


Figure 1: Basic fabric of human relations.



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