

Mentoring Best Practices - Ethics

How do ethics intersect with the mentee-mentor relationship?

Mentors have the responsibility of teaching and role modeling the appropriate ethical behavior of academic professionals. Ethics involves the use of reasoned moral judgments to examine one's responsibility in any given situation. Mentors have the obligation to teach mentees about the responsible conduct of research as well as the ethical issues associated with being an educator and clinician. Both mentors and mentees have the responsibility of behaving ethically in their relationship.

What elements are associated with appropriate ethical behavior in the mentee-mentor relationship?

- Promoting mutual respect and trust.
- Maintaining confidentiality.

Confidentiality is sacrosanct in the mentee-mentor relationship. A breach of confidentiality has the potential to irrevocably rupture the mentee-mentor relationship. At a minimum, breaching confidentiality will cause considerable damage to the trust established between the mentor and mentee.

A breach in confidentiality is a difficult problem to resolve, so it is best to avoid it altogether. At the onset of the relationship, mentees and mentors need to identify the kinds of things that should be confidential, and they need to be up-front about what is acceptable and what is not. When one party thinks there is a reason for disclosing confidential information, s/he should talk with the other to obtain permission in advance.

If, however, a breach of confidentiality has occurred and you want to preserve the relationship despite the lapse in confidentiality, you can try to rectify the situation. The mentor and mentee should make clear what they thought happened and what they can do to avoid the situation in the future. It is vital not to assume intentionality, and the mentee and mentor should try to rebuild the relationship through communication and negotiation. Rebuilding can occur only if both the mentee and the mentor want to preserve the relationship.

- Being diligent in providing knowledge, wisdom, and developmental support.
- Maintaining vigilance with regard to the boundaries of the mentee-mentor relationship. (The power differential increases the mentor's obligation to be cognizant of the mentee's feelings and rights.)

Boundaries – both professional and personal – tend to be sensitive. Crossing boundaries has the unfortunate effect of making both parties uncomfortable and has the potential for creating tension in the mentee-mentor relationship.

It is important that mentors be careful about the requests they make of their mentees, since mentees are inclined to please their mentors and may perceive a request as a demand. In some cases, mentors inadvertently take advantage of their power and have a mentee take on the work of the mentor. In addition to leading to fear and resentment on the part of the mentee, this could increase the mentee's workload and stall progress in his or her career development.

To avoid this problem, the mentee and mentor should discuss boundaries at the onset of the relationship. Different people may have different ideas about what the boundaries should be. For instance, is it appropriate for a mentor to ask a mentee to give a talk that the mentor agreed to give? The extent to which a boundary has been crossed may be unclear. Being prepared will help avoid problems down the line. It may also be useful for mentees to talk to a peer or a peer's mentor to ask for their perspectives on the issue.

- Acknowledging skills and experiences that each brings to the mentee-mentor relationship.
- Carefully framing advice and feedback.

Adapted with permission from the Institute for Clinical Research Education Mentoring Resources, University of Pittsburgh www.icre.pitt.edu/mentoring/overview.html and the Oregon Clinical and Translational Research Institute, Oregon Health & Science University <http://www.ohsu.edu/xd/education/schools/school-of-medicine/faculty/mentoring/>.

What elements are associated with appropriate ethical behavior as academic professionals?

- Agreeing on and abiding by rules of authorship.
- Supporting and appreciating accomplishments.
- Avoiding abuse of power (including exploitation and assuming credit for another's work).
- Being alert to ethical issues and challenges.
- Avoiding conflicts of interest (avoiding political and personal biases).

What elements are associated with the responsible conduct of research?

- Having a commitment to intellectual honesty.
- Accurately representing an individual's contribution to research.
- Following governmental and institutional rules, regulations, and policies.
- Avoiding conflicts of interest (avoiding financial and other influences).

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