Mentee Missteps
Tales From the Academic Trenches

Mentorship takes many forms, from personal and professional counseling to clinical and research guidance. The wisdom and guidance of experienced mentors not only help mentees ascend the academic ladder, but may also prevent burnout. Given the importance of this relationship, it is imperative that mentees put their “best foot forward.” Unfortunately, young physicians are rarely taught what is expected of them as mentees, and mentors vary in discussing “menteeship” with protégés.

Many mentees overlook the fact that they are still learning. Instead, they may feel pressure to appear immediately successful. This desire to please, admixed with paroxysmal bouts of self-doubt, may work against trainees. Rather than appear flawed—or risk displeasing mentors—a mentee may unintentionally “misstep.” These missteps could have devastating consequences, including rejection by a mentor and career implosion.

Mentee missteps are thus paths by which mentees might undermine their careers. We outline six such missteps, using colloquial names to portray extreme examples of what are otherwise common, intermittent mentor behaviors. Our aim is to help mentees self-diagnose before a single misstep becomes a pattern.

Types of Mentee Missteps

The Overcommitter
The Overcommitter is a “yes person.” Overcommitters have a difficult time refusing a request, regardless of relevance or benefit to their career. If they are able to actually fulfill all of their commitments, the end result is often disillusionment and burnout. Often, Overcommitters surpass their capacity, resulting in high-output failure typified by diminishing quantity and quality of work product.

The Ghost
“Ghosting” in US vernacular is the act of “trying to remain out of sight, especially to avoid confrontation.” In academia, ghosting occurs when a mentee hides from a mentor, hoping that poor performance will be forgotten. At best, avoidance is a temporary fix, as a mentor may assume that silence equates to progress. Eventually, evasion dooms the relationship as mistrust accumulates. Ghost mentees thus risk joining their supernatural counterparts in being rarely seen or heard.

The Doormat
Doormats are rarely noticed but often used. Despite doing most of the work, they receive little glory. Doormats often spend their time doing grunt work for their mentor. These tasks usually require extensive time and effort but offer little reward or advancement. This type of mentee may be cultivated by mentors that “malpractice”—especially those who are possessive or exploitative.

The Vampire
The Vampire drains the lifeblood of his or her mentor. Vampires are typified by countless emails, text messages, phone calls, and meeting requests. Although these mentees are often intelligent, they are paralyzed by decision making and rely on mentors for validation. Regardless of the mentor’s generosity, the Vampire demands more, eventually forcing the mentor to sever the connection.

The Lone Wolf
The Lone Wolf appears to have no need for a mentor. This type of trainee has often succeeded previously without assistance and boldly carries forth this behavior. Although Lone Wolves may appear stubborn or confident, internally they fear asking for help lest they appear weak or foolish. This fear becomes their undoing when a preventable but highly embarrassing error occurs due to lack of guidance.

The Backstabber
By the time the Backstabber is identified, it is often too late for the mentor. Backstabbers may initially appear idyllic: they accept challenges, work hard, and perform well. However, Backstabbers are peculiar in that they resent criticism and produce excuses for every failure. This inability to accept culpability eventually leads Backstabbers to sacrifice others when errors occur, shunning blame rather than accepting responsibility.

Origins of Mentee Missteps

These characterizations represent extreme examples of what—in their mild form—are paroxysmal but highly detrimental mentor behaviors. The tendency for these missteps to occur often stems from uncertainty about—and mentors’ failure to address—mentee responsibilities. Relatively simple diagnostic and therapeutic treatment plans can help overcome mentee missteps (Table). For example, the Overcommitter, Ghost, and Dogmat share maladaptive methods of conflict avoidance. Rather than speak openly about their goals, mentees who make these missteps accept tasks in which they have little interest. Once on this path, they fear letting down their mentor and instead work tirelessly to either succeed or avoid their mentor when they fail. Conversely, The Lone Wolf, Vampire, and Backstabber suffer from lack of confidence and failure to understand the expectations of menteeship. The Lone Wolf is afraid to ask for advice and equates success with independence. This type of fixed mindset can lead to lack of
Mentorships are vital to success in any environment. Backstabbers are successful enough to be exposed as an “academic fraud,” yet still lack confidence in their abilities and struggle when making decisions. These mentees may suffer from the imposter syndrome, a common psychological phenomenon marked by an irrational fear of being exposed as an “academic fraud” and inability to “internalize accomplishments,” despite recurrent success. Backstabbers feel that admission of failure is an attack on their personal worth. By not accepting responsibility for their mistakes or seeking mentorship, they can neither feel that admission of failure is an attack on their personal worth. These mentors should understand that such constructive criticism is not malpractice.

Table. Diagnosis and Treatment of Mentee Missteps

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<th>Phenotype</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Diagnostic Signs</th>
<th>Potential Solutions</th>
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<td>Conflict Averse</td>
<td>The Overcommitter: Lacks the ability to say no. Ends up overcommitted and underproducing.</td>
<td>Résumé is filled with a host of committees, volunteer roles, etc., yet few have resulted in academic products such as publications.</td>
<td>Learn to use your mentor or allocated effort as a reason for saying no. Before saying yes to a project, determine which project is now getting a no.</td>
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<td>The Ghost: Appears extremely enthusiastic and energetic, but then disappears without a trace and without notice—especially when problems arise.</td>
<td>Mentee may agree to assignments but fail to follow up. When questions regarding project deadlines arise, the mentee avoids discussion.</td>
<td>When uninterested, suggest an alternative person who may be interested. Address issues early. To reduce anxiety, be prepared with a planned solution.</td>
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<td>The Doormat: Mentee is on the receiving end of a manipulative mentor. The mentee’s energy is used for things that do not further their career, or for which they do not receive credit.</td>
<td>Mentee spends time on work unrelated to their own career. Review of mentee’s progress shows few first-authored papers in mentee’s field of interest.</td>
<td>Ask directly how new projects align with goals. Trial of setting goals and boundaries. Seek new mentors. Establish a mentoring committee.</td>
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<td>Confidence Lacking</td>
<td>The Vampire: Mentee requires constant attention and supervision, leaving mentors drained and empty.</td>
<td>Mentee requests approval or clarification for every step of a project, regardless of prior or similar discussions. Lacks conviction; pivots to mirror mentor.</td>
<td>Recognize and embrace feelings of insecurity; talk with other junior faculty likely struggling with similar decisions. Before taking questions to a mentor, vet a solution with a colleague.</td>
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<td>The Lone Wolf: Assertive, self-motivated, and determined; prefers working alone; believes mentorship is a luxury, not a necessity.</td>
<td>Does not trust others or is afraid to ask for help. Does not work well as part of a team.</td>
<td>Realize that asking for help is critical for learning, not a sign of weakness. Appreciate that working with a team is a key skill for success.</td>
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<td>The Backstabber: This mentee rarely fails, but when this does occur, makes excuses or assigns blame to others rather than to personal missteps.</td>
<td>People who work with this mentee once often don’t want to do so again. Has difficulty accepting responsibility for any mistake; avoids negative feedback.</td>
<td>Reframe mistakes as a learning opportunity. Make giving credit and accepting responsibility a daily goal.</td>
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Conclusions

The relationship between mentors and mentees is bidirectional and critical to academic success. However, mentees may unintentionally jeopardize this relationship when missteps occur. Awareness of these pitfalls and proactive mentorship can not only prevent failure, it can also propel the evolution of mentee to mentor. Those are steps in the right direction.

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