

Coming Full Circle

Emily Lap Sum Musing

In the first article that I wrote as CSHP President,¹ I highlighted the many individuals who have acted as my role models and mentors. It seems only fitting that I circle back to this subject, which is so close to my heart, in this, the last article I write as outgoing Past President.

We often hear about the merits of developing individuals through coaching and mentorship and the importance of creating a mentoring culture to support organizational learning, but where does the term “mentor” come from, and what exactly does it mean?

The term “mentor” was inspired by Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which the goddess Athena takes on the appearance of Mentor, an older man, to provide guidance to young Telemachus.² The concept of mentorship has been built into many historical traditions, from the guru–disciple relationships found in Hinduism to apprenticeships under medieval guilds. In fact, history is littered with examples of famous mentor–protégé relationships such as those between Socrates and Plato, Frederick Banting and Charles Best, and Lauren Harris and Emily Carr. Even our fictional stories are filled with such examples. For instance, one cannot think of Robin without his mentor Batman or Luke Skywalker without Yoda.

Although these traditional images of mentorship often portray a formal relationship, in which an older, more experienced person shares his or her knowledge and insights to groom a protégé toward future leadership roles, the mentors of today take on many forms. In fact, mentorship no longer implies the old mentoring the young. In fact, the converse may occur, whereby a younger individual is able to provide new understanding on how to navigate in our high-tech, high-speed world, or peers form an informal mentoring relationship as a way of sharing resources and networks.

Regardless of the circumstances of the relationship, certain characteristics are shared by good mentors.³ First and foremost, a mentor must have a genuine interest in and a desire to help others (whether this be with respect to their professional or personal growth). They must be at a stage in their own career or life where their level of confidence and contentment allows them to focus beyond their own needs. In other words, they must have

the time and mental energy to devote to nurturing another person. Next, an effective mentor is a person who has benefited from positive life experiences and who thus has the inherent knowledge, insight, and network so vital to the development of a protégé. A final requirement is the ability to use a

wide range of coaching, counselling, modelling, and facilitation skills to expose the protégé to new ideas and applications, and to expand the protégé’s role from dependent learner to career self-reliance. A powerful tool is the sharing of life stories (including open discussion of failures as well as successes), a process that provides valuable opportunities for analysis of life’s realities.

In my own life and career, I have been the lucky recipient of the gift of mentorship from many wise individuals. But this is a gift that is only fully realized through sharing with others. Similar to Plato, who saw the importance of transferring the benefits he gained from Socrates to his own protégé Aristotle, I now have the honour of passing on my humble insights to some of the students, peers, and staff pharmacists with whom I interact. Imagine my pleasure in finding that I am learning as much from these individuals as they are learning from me. In fact, the gift has truly come full circle.

References

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