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# Introduction

*The sweetest path of life leads through the avenues of learning, and whoever can open up the way for another, ought to be esteemed a benefactor to mankind.*

—David Hume

In 1999, after a decade of training mentor teachers and helping school districts establish mentor-based, entry-year programs, an interesting moment occurred. I was making a presentation to a group of about 30 new mentor teachers in a large urban school district. As I recall, we were dealing with a particular problem that one of the mentors had reported on an index card to maintain anonymity. The situation involved a young first-year teacher who had traveled, at the invitation of her principal, to a conference on the West Coast. The purpose of the trip was to visit a school that had been successful in implementing direct instruction strategies, an approach in which the young teacher's district was interested. Apparently, the principal asked the first-year teacher to assume a position of informal leadership within the building and to help other staff members in developing knowledge and skill in direct instruction techniques. Perhaps predictably, the young teacher found herself in an awkward position.

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Veteran staff members, many of whom were opposed to the new approach, resented her involvement, her trip to the West Coast, and her association with the principal, who was disliked by many of the teachers. Consequently, the mentor found herself in the uncomfortable position of not only having to deal with the concerns of her beginning teacher, but with the complaints of her colleagues as well. One of the main complaints was that the beginning teacher was implementing the new strategies, and the veteran teachers were advising the mentor that this was unfair to the children because the teachers had no intention of using such strategies the following school year. After the group discussed the situation from multiple perspectives and talked about alternative responses, a woman, in apparent frustration, stood up and said, "I am tired of all of this talk and all of these different ideas. Can't you just tell us what the right thing to do is in this situation?" Although I was not sure at the time, I assumed that the question was posed by the mentor involved in the situation we had been discussing. I say this because the exasperation she expressed seemed to go far beyond what might have been caused by being involved in a professional development seminar after a full day of teaching, and on a beautiful, autumn afternoon.

### MANY RIGHT WAYS

Driving home that evening, I found myself reflecting on the question the mentor had asked, and on my response. Once the question was on the floor, I remembered looking at the group, who seemed to be waiting for "the" answer. I sensed that a response that started with the words *it depends* was not what they were hoping for, and yet it seemed to me to be *one right place* to begin. Mentoring, like teaching, is a complex enterprise that requires practitioners to be reflective problem solvers who recognize that there are often many right ways to respond to most issues or dilemmas. In almost all cases, the decision that one makes as a mentor or classroom teacher *depends* on one's ability to process multiple sources of information,

anticipate possible outcomes, and choose a course of action that seems warranted in the context in which the problem is being presented—and *presented* is the right word. Just as patients with medical problems present themselves to physicians, students with learning and behavioral problems present themselves to classroom teachers. Likewise, beginning teachers present their problems to mentors. What makes things interesting and challenging for mentors is that beginning teachers, like patients and students, are widely different and present their problems in unpredictable and surprising ways. This reality means that to be a good mentor one must be comfortable—and perhaps even enjoy—dealing with surprise. Writing about leadership, DePree (1989) put it this way: “. . . to be a leader is to enjoy the special privileges of complexity, of ambiguity, of diversity” (p. 22). Clearly, the mentor teacher just described was finding no joy in the process of trying to decide what to do in response to what clearly was an ambiguous situation compounded by diverse opinions. It was, however, her personal uncertainty about what actions to take that I believe was the source of her greatest frustration. She was looking to me for an answer. I was afraid that I disappointed her with my “it depends” response.

### DEPENDS ON WHAT?

I had barely gotten the words out of my mouth when that fear was realized. “Depends, depends on what?” she asked. Sensing her frustration, I explained that her response might depend on many things, things that perhaps only she and the beginning teacher knew about the situation. They, after all, were the closest to the problem and had the most accurate information. An appropriate mentoring response would be based on that information, and on the needs and interests of the beginning teacher, not on the less informed and politically driven concerns of others. I encouraged her to trust herself and what I sensed was her sincere intention to help her beginning teacher deal with this problem.

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A few minutes later the session ended, the teachers left, and I was alone in the room packing my equipment when she returned to offer an apology. "I just wanted to say I am sorry for taking up so much of the group's time. I was upset, and I think I took it out on you. It's just that I want to do a good job, and I don't know if I am." I was struck by this statement for two reasons. First, because I saw it as an honest expression of her commitment to being a good mentor, and second because I so often hear those same words from first-year teachers. My response that fall afternoon was my first articulation of what later would become the *High-Performance Mentoring Framework*, the foundation for a training program by the same name, and now the basis of this book as well.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

High-performing mentor teachers regularly reflect on their mentoring efforts and assume responsibility for self-assessment. They realize and accept that ultimately they are responsible for affirming or constructively critiquing their personal efforts to help a beginning teacher. I went on to share my belief that such mentor teachers ask themselves, in one way or another, the following important questions:

- Have I acted in ways that demonstrate that I am *truly committed* to helping the person I am mentoring?
- Have I fully and unconditionally accepted my beginning teacher and endeavored to see her problems through her eyes?
- Have I communicated thoughtfully by adjusting my communication behaviors to meet the individual and developmental needs of the beginning teacher?
- Have I employed coaching strategies that are appropriate for the knowledge or skill the beginning teacher needs or wants to develop?

- Have I been a model of a continuous learner who is open to new avenues of personal and professional growth?
- Have I been present in the life of my beginning teacher in a way that has helped him develop a sense of hope and optimism for the future?

That afternoon, I encouraged a new mentor to begin asking herself these questions, and to believe that if she would reflect on them periodically, she would be on the path to becoming the kind of mentor teacher that I knew she wanted to be. I encouraged her to remember that being able to answer “yes” to all the questions was both a goal and a process. She said she liked the questions, and wished that I would write them down so that she could think more about them. I promised that I would. My response to that request was the creation of the High-Performance Mentoring Framework (see Table 1.1). It is my hope that reading and reflecting on the chapters that follow will help you become personally engaged in the process of becoming a high-performance mentor teacher.

**Table 1.1** Qualities of the High-Performance Mentor Teacher

<i>Qualities of the High-Performance Mentor Teacher: Knowledge, Skills, and Values</i>		
<i>Commits to the Roles and Responsibilities of Mentoring</i>	<i>Accepts the Beginning Teacher as a Developing Person and Professional</i>	<i>Reflects on Interpersonal Communications and Decisions</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicates time to meet with the mentee</li> <li>• Persists in efforts to assist the mentee despite obstacles or setbacks</li> <li>• Maintains congruence between mentoring words and actions</li> <li>• Attends meetings and professional development programs related to mentoring</li> <li>• Models self-reflection and self-assessment as hallmarks of professionalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values acceptance as the foundation of a helping relationship</li> <li>• Understands the differences among beginning teachers from multiple perspectives</li> <li>• Endeavors to see the world through the mentee's eyes</li> <li>• Communicates respect and positive regard for the mentee</li> <li>• Models acceptance of diversity in others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects on what, where, when, and how to communicate with the mentee</li> <li>• Adjusts communication style to the developmental needs of the mentee</li> <li>• Respects the confidentiality of the mentor-mentee relationship</li> <li>• Self-discloses regarding one's own professional challenges</li> <li>• Models effective helping relationship skills</li> </ul>

<i>Serves as an Instructional Coach</i>	<i>Models a Commitment to Personal and Professional Growth</i>	<i>Inspires Hope and Optimism for the Future</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employs the clinical cycle of instructional support</li> <li>• Values the role of shared experience in the coaching process</li> <li>• Engages the mentee in team planning and team teaching whenever possible</li> <li>• Possesses knowledge of effective teaching practices</li> <li>• Models openness to new ideas and instructional practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lives the life of learner as well as teacher</li> <li>• Engages the mentee as fellow student of teaching and learning</li> <li>• Pursues professional growth related to teaching and mentoring</li> <li>• Advises the mentee on professional growth opportunities</li> <li>• Models fallibility as a quality fundamental to personal and professional growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages and praises the mentee</li> <li>• Holds and communicates high expectations for the mentee</li> <li>• Projects a positive disposition toward the teaching profession</li> <li>• Avoids criticism of students, parents, and colleagues</li> <li>• Models personal and professional self-efficacy</li> </ul>

SOURCE: Adapted from Rowley & Hart (2000).