

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Relating*

Rasheed had always wanted to teach, and now he had landed his first teaching job. In spite of his excellent student teaching experience, he found himself overwhelmed by the activities and responsibilities of the first few weeks. The formal orientation to the school and bus tour of the town helped a little, but for the most part, he felt that he was operating in the classroom without sufficient information and with little support.

He had been assigned Tanya as a “mentor.” Tanya was an experienced teacher who, Rasheed was told, would help him through the first few months. Rasheed met Tanya briefly during orientation. “Don’t worry, you’ll do just fine,” she told him. “We’ll set up a schedule of meetings to discuss how I can be of help to you. Meanwhile, don’t hesitate to come see me any time you have any questions.”

Even though Rasheed did have questions and occasionally experienced feelings of insecurity, he was reluctant to burden his mentor with his problems. When they had their first meeting, Rasheed glossed over the difficulties he was having with class management—after all, he did not want to appear incompetent. Tanya was aware of his problems with classroom discipline, but not wanting to give the impression that she was a “prying know-it-all,” she too avoided the topic. Consequently, although Rasheed and Tanya met regularly and exchanged pleasantries, they never did have a meaningful discussion about his classroom management concerns or, for that matter, about any other issue. It was no surprise, then, that the first few months of teaching were somewhat chaotic for Rasheed.

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Mentoring requires interaction. But in order to be productive, mentor-mentee interactions must take place within a relationship that includes mutual trust, honesty, respect, and a joyful willingness to work together. It is important to build and maintain a productive mentor-mentee relationship because it provides the mechanism for—and is the source of energy behind—a mentor's ability to carry out the other mentoring functions.

Unless a solid working relationship is established from the start, the mentoring process runs the risk of being like that experienced by Rasheed and Tanya: perfunctory and routine. Even if a relationship is initially well established, it needs to be maintained. Otherwise, over time, interactions between mentor and mentee will tend to deteriorate into workaday obligations. Therefore, your first, and potentially most challenging, responsibility as a mentor is to develop and maintain a productive relationship with your mentee.

So how do you go about developing and maintaining a productive mentoring relationship—one that you and your mentee will cherish as an opportunity for collegial interchange and professional growth? In this chapter, we will explore four powerful sets of behaviors—establishing trust, paying attention to thoughts and feelings, honoring confidentiality, and communicating nonverbally—that can help you build a beneficial collegial relationship with your mentee.

### **ESTABLISHING TRUST**

Before we consider how to build trust in a mentor-mentee relationship—and why trust is an important part of that relationship—we need to be clear as to what constitutes trust. What does trust mean to you? What is it like to be in a relationship where trust exists? In what ways do you relate differently to a person you trust from the way you relate to someone you do not particularly trust? The following exercise will help answer these questions.

### Exercise 1.1 How You Act When You Trust

Think about someone you know and trust. Keep that person in mind as you complete the following sentence:

*Because I trust (the person you have in mind), I . . .* (List several behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and expectations you experience because you trust that person.)

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*Note:* I've done this exercise, too, but don't peek at my list on the next page until you have created your own in the space above. There are no "right" answers, of course, because we all have our own perception of trust. I am sharing my list just to provide another viewpoint.

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Here is my list:

Because I trust Mary, I . . .

*freely share my experiences and my aspirations.*

*tend to use humor more often.*

*listen to and respect her opinions, even though I may disagree.*

*will ask for and appreciate her opinion and advice.*

*will lend or give her a cherished possession.*

*try to understand her meanings and intent by probing for more information.*

*am willing to offer more information if asked.*

*feel at ease with her.*

*feel comfortable asking her for help.*

Now that you and I have more or less defined trust in terms of its associated behaviors, the next question we need to answer in keeping with our focus on building a productive mentor-mentee relationship is how to get your mentee to trust you.

**Exercise 1.2** Behaviors That Elicit Trust

Complete the following sentence:

*When I want someone to trust me, I . . .* (List several behaviors you exhibit when you want someone to trust you.)

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*Note:* Yes, I have developed a list for this exercise also. It is on the following page. Wait, don't turn the page yet. Complete your list first.

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Here is my list:

When I want someone to trust me, I . . .

*walk the talk; that is, I do what I said I would do. As a friend of mine puts it, “trust is the residue of promises kept.”*

*respect confidentiality.*

*respond to the other person’s statements and questions to their satisfaction before introducing another topic.*

*express my feelings as well as my thoughts.*

*recognize and respect his or her feelings and ideas, even though I may not agree with them.*

Now, between your lists and mine, we have a litany of trust-building behaviors.

Why is trust so important an ingredient in a relationship? It is important because it allows both the mentor and mentee to recognize, accept, discuss, and consequently work to improve ineffective practices. After all, it takes trust to ask for help, to expose your insecurities and inexperience to a coworker, and to leave yourself vulnerable and open to ridicule. It may well be necessary for your mentee to risk these behaviors in order to help you understand the crux of a situation.

### **PAYING ATTENTION TO THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS**

Do you remember what was going through your mind and the emotions you experienced that first day on the job as a teacher? Too many years ago? Well, then, how about a more recent situation—like when you first thought about being a mentor. The following exercise may help you recall that occasion.

**Exercise 1.3** Relive the Experience

When the possibility of being a mentor first occurred to you, do you remember what it felt like? What were some of your concerns, thoughts, and feelings?

Read the following scenarios. As you read, try to recall some of the thoughts and feelings you had when you first considered being a mentor. Jot down your reflections in the space provided on page 18.

**Scene 1:** Gloria, a high school biology teacher, picks up the memo she found in her school mail box this morning. It reads:

MEMO TO: Gloria

FROM: Building Principal

RE: Invitation to mentor a new teacher

Several new teachers will be joining our staff when the school year begins next fall. As you know, the district has recently instituted a Beginning Teacher Support Program that matches newly hired teachers with experienced ones. I feel you would make an excellent mentor for one of our new colleagues. Please come to my office during your scheduled free period next Tuesday when we can discuss details.

Gloria opens her scheduling book and enters a note about meeting with the principal on the following Tuesday.

**Scene 2:** Next Tuesday, Gloria's free period. She rereads the memo, tucks it into her scheduling book, tucks the scheduling book under her arm, and heads toward the principal's office.

"Me, a mentor?" she thinks to herself as she walks down the hall.

"Hey, why not! The principal thinks I can do it. After all, good mentoring is probably very much like good teaching. Here is my chance to help a new teacher by passing on what I've learned over the past 10 years."

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“I am looking forward to being an ‘official’ mentor. I’ve helped beginning teachers before, but I’ve never really had the formal responsibility. But what if I do a poor job? How will I feel about myself? What will others think of me?”

“Hey, why am I worrying? I’m good at what I do. I know how to teach; I have good rapport with my students and colleagues.”

“I remember back when I first started teaching. I had doubts about whether I would ever become a competent teacher, let alone survive my first year in the classroom. I really felt that I was on my own. I did make it finally, but I sure wish I had someone there for me, someone I felt comfortable with. I guess a mentor is someone that I could call on when I needed help, information, or just reassurance.”

“I know I should be more confident. I’ve heard and read enough about mentoring new teachers to understand what’s involved. So why do I feel so apprehensive?”

“There are so many questions I have. When I meet with the principal, I’m sure some of these questions will be answered, but will the new teacher—my mentee—and I get along? I probably will get to watch my mentee teach, but how would I feel about having him or her watch me teach? There must be some expertise a mentor needs beyond good interpersonal skills and experience as a teacher. What are they? Do I have them? If not, will I have the opportunity to acquire them?”

Gloria reaches the principal’s office and enters with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation.

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Did any of Gloria's reactions to taking on that new role resonate with ones you experienced at the time? If you are a veteran teacher like Gloria, you probably experienced both anticipation and trepidation when faced with a new and important professional challenge. Imagine, then, what it must be like for a new teacher today. In addition to the many complex issues you probably faced when you became an educator, today's first-year teacher—your mentee—will be working from day one with an increasingly diverse student population and probably facing the challenge of integrating students with special needs into his or her classroom.

Your mentee will have questions about such issues as curriculum, materials, parent meetings, school policy, and the community. Your mentee will also have thoughts and feelings about many other aspects of his or her new profession. He or she will probably ask the questions, but unless you two have developed a relationship with a history of attending to relevant thoughts and feelings, the discussion runs the risk of producing only superficial information from your mentee, thus allowing you only limited insight into the gist of the question. In other words, thoughts and feelings add depth to communication.

A powerful way to build and maintain a productive mentoring relationship is to share thoughts and feelings about teaching. It is important that you really listen to what your mentee tells you—not just to the words, but also to the feelings.

For example, responding to the following statement from your mentee: "I will be teaching exactly what I had hoped for—sixth-grade math and science," with: "It sounds as though you're excited about meeting your students and getting started," will show the mentee that he or she is being heard at a deeper level than just the content of the words. Once those feelings have been addressed and accepted, the way may well be open for the mentee to voluntarily provide additional information and express some concerns that he or she was not comfortable doing before. So, not only is this attention to feelings helpful to the development of a good relationship, it also is an excellent way to draw out the mentee's specific needs and concerns.

Of course, you could just come right out and ask the new teacher what needs or concerns he or she has about teaching math and science to sixth graders, and you may get some useful information. But until the mentee trusts that feelings will be heard and honored, it may be difficult for him or her to risk exposing any insecurities to a stranger. Indeed, such a direct question—no matter how well intended—may even provoke additional feelings of insecurity.

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By way of illustration, suppose that Sharon is Rolf's mentor. Sharon sits next to Rolf in the teachers' room one morning before school, nods a good morning to her mentee, and asks, "How are your classes going? You're working on writing, aren't you?"

"Oh, the students are writing OK," Rolf replies, "but I wish they would pay more attention to spelling."

"Don't worry about that," says Sharon. "Their spelling will improve in time. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

Rolf sighs, "No, thanks. I had some earlier."

Sharon did not do a very good job of mentoring here, did she? Let's back up and consider what she could have said to acknowledge feelings, build trust, and encourage Rolf to consider a wider range of options.

When Rolf said, "The students are writing OK, but I wish they would pay more attention to spelling," Sharon should have let Rolf know that she was aware of the feelings beneath the words by saying, for example, "It sounds as though you are concerned about your students' poor spelling. Go on, tell me more."

As their conversation progressed, Sharon should have periodically checked out her understanding of what Rolf was saying by restating in her own words what she had heard (e.g., "If I hear you correctly, you are saying that . . .") "Let's see if I understand you. Are you saying . . .?" "When you said . . ., it seemed you were implying . . ."). Sharon then would have allowed Rolf to correct, clarify, or validate his restatement.

Suppose Rolf asks, "Do you think I should assign the students extra homework in spelling?"

Sometimes it is effective to answer a question with another question. This encourages your mentee to probe for his own answer. The questions you ask should be open-ended in that they require more than a "yes," "no," or other one-word answer. Starting your question with "why" or "how" will serve this purpose. How do you think Sharon could respond to Rolf's question about assigning extra spelling homework? Write your thoughts in the space below.

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Here are some other relating behaviors that Sharon, the mentor, would find productive:

- Use descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental statements. For example, if she is giving feedback to Rolf about how he disciplined a disruptive student, Sharon might begin by saying, “I noticed that you took a big breath just before going over to talk to (the disruptive student).”
- When Rolf says or indicates something to her, Sharon needs to be aware that her mentee expects her response to be relevant to what he just said. By not honoring that expectation, Sharon risks cutting off further discussion of that topic, inhibiting further discussion in general, and eroding a little of the relationship.
- Occasionally, Sharon should check out the accuracy of any assumptions she may have about her mentee’s unspoken thoughts or feelings. She can do this by paraphrasing back to her mentee what it is she assumes and allowing him to confirm or clarify.
- Above all, Sharon must—as all mentors must—respect confidentiality.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is such an important element of the mentor/mentee relationship, and so prone to misunderstanding, that its meaning and subtleties cannot be taken for granted. One of the first conversations a mentor and mentee have should lead to mutual agreement as to how each views and intends to exercise confidentiality. Here is a suggested set of issues for a discussion between mentor and mentee about ground rules for confidentiality:

- How much of what we discuss should remain only between us? For how long?
- Under what circumstances would it be OK for either of us to talk with a colleague (e.g., principal, another mentor, another teacher) about our mentoring relationship?
- What will the mentor do if asked by an administrator to provide an evaluation of the mentee?

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- Under what circumstances and to what extent would it be acceptable for either of us to share information with a supervisor or administrator about the other's performance or behaviors? For example, in the event the mentor determines that a student or another person is in physical, emotional, or psychological danger because of a mentee's action or inaction, it is the mentor's obligation to bring the situation to the attention of the proper individual. Should the situation be reported without informing the mentee?

A district mentoring team might find it helpful to develop its own confidentiality ground rules such as the following example.

In general, mentors will not discuss the new teacher's performance with anyone, including school and district administration, except under the following conditions (Ribas, 2006):

1. A mentor will be able to discuss, in confidence and **with the new teacher's knowledge**, any aspect of the teacher's performance with other members of the mentoring team. (Note: In this case, the mentoring team will not include an administrator or supervisor.)
2. A mentor, **with the new teacher's knowledge and permission**, may discuss the new teacher's performance with resource professionals whose job it is to help teachers.
3. A mentor, **with the new teacher's knowledge**, may discuss the new teacher's performance with appropriate administrators if, in the mentor's professional judgment, the academic growth and development, social well-being, or physical safety of the students or other members of the school community are at risk.

### THE STUDENT TEACHER DILEMMA

In just about every teacher preparation program in the United States, schools of education require and arrange for their students, typically in their senior year, to *student teach* in a public or private school preservice program. This field-based experience is usually a credit-course and is graded. The major responsibility for day-to-day

guidance of student teachers rests with the classroom teacher, usually referred to as a *cooperating* teacher. In addition to assisting the student teacher, the cooperating teacher is also expected to report on the student teacher's performance and recommend a grade. From what I have been able to ascertain, not many states require training for cooperating teachers. One exception is Section 1-10-145d-8-x of The Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies, which defines student teaching as "supervised full day practice teaching, *with a trained cooperating teacher*, as part of an [approved] educator preparation program" (emphasis mine). Connecticut's cooperating teachers are also encouraged to participate in the state's mentor training program. In some other states, the unofficial criteria are that cooperating teachers have a minimum number of years of experience and be willing to take on a student teacher. To exacerbate the situation, not all higher education institutions offer training for cooperating teachers that includes coaching or mentoring.

The role of a cooperating teacher includes responsibilities similar to those of a teacher-mentor, that is, to develop and provide a teaching/learning atmosphere that supports dialogue and discussion, promotes the sharing of advice and constructive feedback, and encourages open communication. There is one important difference, however, between mentoring a first- or second-year teacher and mentoring a student teacher. The mentor of a student teacher is involved in evaluating and grading; the mentor of a new teacher is not. The student-teacher/cooperating-teacher relationship is impacted by the need to share information about performance with others who will use that information to evaluate the student teacher; therefore, the relationship cannot be entirely confidential. Nevertheless, it must be based on openness and trust in order to work to its best advantage.

Cooperating teachers need to make it clear to their charges that their role is to help them succeed. The cooperating teacher's dilemma, of course, is twofold: (a) gaining and keeping a student teacher's trust while giving up some aspects of confidentiality and (b) not letting the need for a trusting relationship interfere with evaluation and grading responsibilities. This is why training of cooperating teachers is so important and must include methods of establishing openness and trust within the student-teacher/cooperating-teacher relationship.

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An effective way to encourage trust and openness is to regularly check to determine whether student teachers feel they are receiving the help they need. Five factors for mentoring practices identified by Hudson, Skamp, and Brooks (2005) provide a handy checklist for this purpose. The factors—Personal Attributes, System Requirements, Pedagogical Knowledge, Modeling, and Feedback—and their attributes are listed below. Does your student teacher perceive that you

### (Personal Attributes)

- are supportive
- are comfortable in talking
- are attentive
- instill confidence
- instill positive attitudes
- assist in reflecting

### (System Requirements)

- discuss aims
- outline curriculum
- discuss policies

### (Pedagogical Knowledge)

- guide preparation
- assist with timetabling
- assist with classroom management
- assist with teaching strategies
- assist in planning
- discuss implementation
- discuss content knowledge
- provide viewpoints
- discuss questioning techniques
- discuss assessment
- discuss problem solving

### (Modeling)

- model rapport with students
- display enthusiasm
- model a well-designed lesson
- model effective teaching

- model classroom management
- demonstrate hands-on approaches
- use syllabus language

(Feedback)

- observe teaching for feedback
- provide oral feedback
- review lesson plans
- provide evaluation on teaching
- provide written feedback
- articulate expectations

## COMMUNICATING NONVERBALLY

Suppose you run into someone you haven't seen in a while and the person smiles and says to you, "So tell me, how are you, and what have you been up to lately?" Before you can answer, the smile disappears; the person glances at his or her watch, and then starts looking around, but not at you. Which message do you trust? What feelings are being expressed? I don't know about you, but to me the nonverbal message would come across much more strongly than the spoken words.

There is power in body language. When gestures and words conflict, confusion enters the relationship; when they are in harmony, trust is communicated and received. Notice your mentee's facial expressions and general posture while he or she is speaking to you. Is he or she relaxed? Tense? Distracted? Even when a person's demeanor seems to be in sync with their words, the way he or she sits or moves can add other dimensions to what is being said at the time.

You may want to check out the accuracy of how you perceive your mentee's nonverbal expressions. Doing so will give your mentee the opportunity to clarify and perhaps to expand upon his or her comments. Keep in mind, however, that in and of itself, a specific body movement or expression does not necessarily indicate a specific meaning. Nonverbal cues should be considered together with other gestures and in context with spoken words. In addition, there are regional and cultural variations in the use and meaning of gestures and expressions that need to be considered. In general, however, most people will take someone leaning toward them while they

are talking as meaning *I am hearing you and interested in what you are saying*. Crossed arms, by contrast, may connote discomfort with—or rejection of—an idea.

To what extent are you aware of the reactions your use of body language evokes in others? For example, when you are listening to your mentee and nod your head occasionally, chances are he or she feels that you are really paying attention to his or her words. The following exercise will show you the power of body language.

#### **Exercise 1.4** The Power of Body Language

When you find yourself in the kinds of situations described below, try using the body language I suggest and see what happens. In each of the two scenarios, notice that you consciously change or shift from one position to another. Take note of any changes in the content and quality of conversation that occurs after you shift. If your mentee is the other person in this exercise, be sure to explain, after it is over, what you were doing and why. You share this information with your mentee in order to reinforce trust and to dispel any misunderstanding that may have occurred. It would be advantageous to have the exercises videotaped, if doing so would not interfere with the activity, because it would be helpful to review the interactions from the viewpoint of an uninvolved observer.

**Situation A:** During a conversation, the other person begins telling you about something that happened earlier. Lean slightly toward the speaker. Look at him or her with interest. Occasionally, nod your head.

In the middle of one of the speaker's sentences, shift. Lean back, look away, and cross your arms. If the speaker asks you whether anything is wrong (or words to that effect) answer, "Oh, no. Please continue," but keep your body language aloof.

**Situation B:** During a conversation, you notice that the other person is sitting rather stiffly with fingers clasped together or grasping the arms of the chair. His or her feet are planted squarely on the floor, and he or she appears somewhat uncomfortable. Mirror the other's manner; assume the same posture and demeanor.



Early into the conversation, begin to gradually shift your body. First, unclasp your fingers. Wait for a corresponding relaxation of hands by the other person, then cross one leg over the other toward the person. Continue gradually moving your body into a more relaxed position, making slight changes each time your colleague mirrors your last adjustment.

When you carry out this exercise, you will probably notice that your body language communicated strong messages and elicited definite responses. In conversations with your mentee, if your words are honest, your body language will automatically reinforce what you say and contribute to the development of trust in your relationship.

Unless proven otherwise, trust that your mentee will be honest with you, will follow through with what he or she has agreed to do, and will honor the commitment made to the mentoring process. Your behaviors must engender the same level of trust in your mentee.

## **A CHECKLIST OF RELATING BEHAVIORS**

- ✓ To the best of your ability, do you do what you say you will do?
- ✓ If you find that you cannot follow through on a promise, do you let your mentee know and suggest an alternative?
- ✓ Unless given permission by your mentee, do you treat in confidence anything of a personal or professional nature that he or she tells you or you observe? (Of course, you will need to use your judgment in the event the situation involves a matter of safety, endangerment, or professional malpractice.)
- ✓ When your mentee offers some information or opinion or asks a question, do you respond to his or her statement or query before going on to another topic?
- ✓ Where you feel comfortable doing so, do you express your feelings as well as thoughts about a topic under discussion?
- ✓ Do you acknowledge and respect your mentee's feelings and ideas, even though you may not agree with them?
- ✓ Do you probe for thoughts and feelings as well as facts when discussing professional issues?

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- ✓ When your mentee offers some important information, do you encourage your mentee to say more in more detail?
- ✓ Do you periodically check out your assumptions about what your mentee was thinking and feeling as well as what was said? (You can do this by restating in your own words what you heard and assumed and then allowing your mentee to correct, clarify, or validate your restatement.)
- ✓ Do you respect your mentee's ability to make decisions by encouraging him or her to probe for his or her own answers?
- ✓ Do you use descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental statements when reviewing a mentee's decision or behavior?
- ✓ Do you let your body language reinforce the intent of your words?
- ✓ Are you sensitive to mixed messages—contradictory words and gestures—both from yourself and from your mentee? (You can avoid sending conflicting messages by being honest in what you say.)
- ✓ If you think you perceive disharmony between words and body movement, do you check out your assumptions and give your mentee the opportunity to clarify?

### **A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP IS A SERVING RELATIONSHIP**

Rachel Naomi Remen, clinical professor of family and community medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, in a talk given at the “Open Heart, Open Mind” conference in San Diego, California, in July 1995, made an observation about the caregiving relationship that applies equally to the mentoring relationship. She said, “Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals . . . Helping incurs debt. When you help someone they owe you one. But serving, like healing, is mutual. There is no debt. I am as served as the person I am serving. When I help I have a feeling of satisfaction. When I serve I have a feeling of gratitude. These are very different things.” Remen went on to say, “Serving is also different from fixing. When I fix a person, I perceive them as broken. There is distance between ourselves and whatever or whomever we are fixing [and] we cannot serve at a distance.”