

Mentee Missteps

Tales From the Academic Trenches

Valerie Vaughn, MD, MSc

Department of Internal Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor.

Sanjay Saint, MD, MPH

VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and the Department of Internal Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor.

Vineet Chopra, MD, MSc

Department of Internal Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor; and the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Corresponding

Author: Valerie M. Vaughn, MD, MSc (valmv@med.umich.edu).

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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.¹ 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 mentee 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 scut 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.²

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 sans 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 mentee 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 Doormat 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

Table. Diagnosis and Treatment of Mentee Missteps

Phenotype	Description	Diagnostic Signs	Potential Solutions	
			Mentee	Mentor
Conflict Averse				
The Overcommitter	Lacks the ability to say no. Ends up overcommitted and underproducing.	Résumé is filled with a host of committees, volunteer roles, etc, yet few have resulted in academic products such as publications.	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.	Add new items to this mentee's list only after old ones are completed. Have mentee identify his or her career goals, then stick to projects that align.
The Ghost	Appears extremely enthusiastic and energetic, but then disappears without a trace and without notice—especially when problems arise.	Mentee may agree to assignments but fail to follow up. When questions regarding project deadlines arise, the mentee avoids discussion.	When uninterested, suggest an alternative person who may be interested. Address issues early. To reduce anxiety, be prepared with a planned solution.	Mentees should gauge their true interest in new projects and be allowed to decline. Set goals to address problems forthrightly, and praise mentees for their candor when issues raised.
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.	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.	Ask directly how new projects align with goals. Trial of setting goals and boundaries. Seek new mentors. Establish a mentoring committee.	Before assigning a project to a mentee, evaluate if it is in their best interest. Allow mentees to use you as an excuse not to participate in another's projects.
Confidence Lacking				
The Vampire	Mentee requires constant attention and supervision, leaving mentors drained and empty.	Mentee requests approval or clarification for every step of a project, regardless of prior or similar discussions. Lacks conviction; pivots to mirror mentor.	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.	Set clear goals and boundaries, including what questions require approval and what do not. Have mentees "put their nickel down" when asking for help.
The Lone Wolf	Assertive, self-motivated, and determined; prefers working alone; believes mentorship is a luxury, not a necessity.	Does not trust others or is afraid to ask for help. Does not work well as part of a team.	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.	Be specific in things that can be done with and without mentor consultation. Define the mentee's role, as well as the role of other team members.
The Backstabber	This mentee rarely fails, but when this does occur, makes excuses or assigns blame to others rather than to personal missteps.	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.	Reframe mistakes as a learning opportunity. Make giving credit and accepting responsibility a daily goal.	Emphasize that honesty, not perfection, is critical in a mentee. If mentee cannot accept this responsibility, seek a new mentee.

effort and poor resilience after failure.³ Vampires, on the other hand, 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.^{4,5} Backstabbers feel that admission of failure is an attack on their personal worth. By not accepting responsibility for their mistakes, they can neither grow nor learn from them.

Revisiting Menteeship

To avoid missteps, mentees should begin by delineating personal and career goals. Explicitly stating these objectives can help minimize conflict and maximize benefit for both mentees and mentors. This exercise also enables mentors to pick projects more suited to the

mentee while helping the mentee say no to tasks.⁶ Mentees must also embrace the fact that their role is to learn, not be perfect. Mentors and mentees should therefore reframe mistakes as improvement opportunities, not evidence of failure. When the inevitable misstep does occur, they must be addressed directly and candidly. Mentees should understand that such constructive criticism is not judgment of character, but the building blocks of future success.

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 menteeship 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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