

Inspiring Good Work

Steroid abuse. Accounting tricks. Plagiarism. Budding professionals are learning these tricks of their trades from mentors, say researchers **Wendy Fischman and **Howard Gardner**. Who will inspire them to practice ethics and excellence on the job?**

LOREN, A TALL AND THIN 17-YEAR-OLD Cuban American, wears a blue bandana to cover his dark brown hair, a gold chain around his neck, and a small hoop earring. He is an aspiring actor, studying at LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts. In an interview about his interest in theater, he described an influential role model, Puerto Rican actor Raul Julia:

I met him when I was about four. ... I went and saw a lot of his plays, and I was always so inspired by him, and he made me realize that I wanted to do acting. And he has been a symbol, not only for all actors—I think he's a brilliant actor—but also he ... used his influence to help his country. He was a humanitarian. ... It's very inspiring to me. And he gave me a lot of ideas of what I want to do. ... I'd like to have as much of a positive influence as I could.

Steve, a 32-year-old geneticist, works at a biotechnology company. He told a very different story when he remembered how he asked his undergraduate mentor to help him land his first job a decade ago.

We totally fabricated my resume. I mean, we wrote down all of this stuff that I had never, ever done. ... It was complete bunk. ... He gave me a resume—it was either his or one of his graduate students' or something—and said, "This is the stuff we're doing in [the] lab, just put this on." ... He was totally unethical. ... I actually haven't talked to him since I left ... but the key was that he got me my first job, so I have to thank him for that.

Loren and Steve both participated in the GoodWork Project, a research project that we've helped conduct over the past decade. The project aims to uncover

the origins of and obstacles to professional work that is high quality, socially responsible, and personally meaningful. We have interviewed over 1,200 professionals who are at different levels in their careers and represent a variety of professions, including journalism, genetics, higher education, philanthropy, law, business, theater, and medicine. Much of our work has focused on what it takes to inspire good work in young professionals. Where does the drive to do good work come from, and how can we help develop it?

In our research we often heard about the importance of inspirational mentors—individuals who set an example of how work can be meaningful for individual professionals as well as make a positive contribution to the broader society. More than a nice way to make new workers feel at home in the workplace, mentors actually exert tremendous influence over the direction of a young person's career. Through 150 interviews with young professionals, we learned about inspirational mentors like Loren's; more frequently, though, we heard discouraging stories like Steve's. In an age of powerful market forces and rapid technological changes, it seems that young people are having a difficult time connecting with inspirational mentors—and, all too often, they associate with negative mentors instead.

As a result, our research suggests, society's next generation of leaders is learning first hand to place monetary gain or power above a sense of responsibility to others or a commitment to professional ethics. Fortunately, we've also identified some ways to help reverse these trends before it's too late.

Mentorship and good work

Historically, mentors have played important roles in the lives of young professionals. Apprenticeships, internships, post-doctoral studies, and the like are

designed to give budding professionals the opportunity to work alongside more experienced professionals, with the expectation that they'll learn not only technical skills, but also come to appreciate the core ethical values of their field. In some cases, this kind of careful, explicit mentoring still exists. For the most part, however, as professions are changing, so are the mentoring relationships. And so, while we encountered examples of remarkable mentoring, we were struck by the damage caused by a lack of contemporary mentors and by inadequate or even pernicious mentoring (which we call "tormenting").

Many novice professionals we interviewed described shortcomings of and disappointment with their mentors—a lack of meaningful, deep relationships, or, equally disturbing, encounters with veteran professionals whose own work ethics were dubious. Indeed, a young social entrepreneur who we interviewed observed that the veterans around him took a selfish approach to mentoring. "They were all about themselves and their own egos," he said. "That completely undermined ... [the] people that were working for them [who were] try[ing] to work on the goal or the mission. It's amazing how common it is for people to be driven by what makes them feel more important."

In an era when nearly all professionals are being roiled by fierce competition in an increasingly global marketplace, we found that individuals express little responsibility to their workplace, perhaps in part because jobs are becoming more transient and fewer apprenticeships and substantive internships are available.

Though veteran professionals describe feeling responsible to their professions and to the younger professionals entering it, they do not always act on these responsibilities. This is partly due to circumstances beyond their control: Experienced professionals have less time to spend with new-



Rafael Lopez

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comers as the pace of work and the size of their workload has steadily increased.

This lack of “good” mentors often induces many young people to model themselves after individuals who they see as “successful,” even if that person’s actions are reprehensible. Steve, for example, the biotechnology worker quoted earlier, was able to recognize the unethical behavior of his “mentor,” but he still valued the mentor’s ability to get him a position in a competitive field. Clearly, negative models like these are powerful and, unfortunately, may resonate with young professionals.

Without experienced professionals who model both excellence and ethics in their work, young professionals necessarily focus on superficial traits as the standard of success. They notice the multi-million dollar contracts of professional athletes who

secretly take strength-enhancing drugs; the front page bylines of journalists who invent stories and sources; the wealth and political influence of CEOs who falsify revenue statements. Jayson Blair (who agreed to be a subject in our study and twice failed to show up for an interview) is an example of a young journalist at *The New York Times* who learned to value superficial results over and above due diligence and integrity. Blair did not hesitate to make up or steal stories in order to meet the expectations of his superiors; despite some internal speculation that something wasn’t quite right about his work, the paper’s editors deemed him a rising star because of his “success” at getting attractive stories.

The situation that we’ve described isn’t hopeless. Our research has also uncovered powerful examples of positive mentors who

try to pass on a passion for their profession and a sense of pride in doing work that benefits others. Young persons see these mentors as true to the mission of their work, socially responsible, and able to overcome challenges without compromising their values. For these mentors, “success” is measured by the impact of work on society, rather than by individual gain of money or power. In addition to being inspired by these individuals, participants describe how they emulate these attributes in their own work. Indeed, sometimes they want to carry on a mentor’s work as a way of maintaining his legacy.

In the stories participants told us about inspirational mentors, we’ve identified three traits and situations that inspired them to carry out good work: perseverance in the face of adversity; creativity in extending the boundaries of their profession; and commitment to the mission of their work.

Perseverance

Inspiring to many individuals we interviewed was a mentor’s courage in persevering through challenging situations—including working in unsafe conditions, holding on to an unpopular belief, or risking reputation in order to help others. A graduate student in nursing told us about her grandmother’s work providing medical services to economically disadvantaged communities in New York City during the 1930s and 1940s. She described how visiting nurses traveled across tenement rooftops because it was



Ron Rinaldi

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One aspiring actor cited Raul Julia (top) as an inspiration. Budding politicians or journalists might gain similar inspiration from studying the lives of Eleanor Roosevelt or Edward R. Murrow.

safer than the crowded, often dangerous, stairwells in many buildings. She said she became a nurse at a homeless shelter to “keep the family legacy alive.”

A high school journalist similarly described how her grandfather's willingness to sacrifice his life for his work inspired her to pursue a career in journalism. While covering the Battle of the Bulge as a journalist during World War II, her grandfather saw the enemy coming and fired his rifle to alert his troops, thus making himself a target. At that moment, she said, he realized that journalism required the same sacrifice: risking self to inform others. Because of the stories she has heard about her grandfather, this young journalist was guided by the idea that newspapers are “really for the public” and that a journalist's job is to educate others, not to “get the story” or sell papers. She believes other journalists are as motivated as she is by the value of service to others.

Repeatedly we observed how examples of people persevering to carry out important work, regardless of inherent challenges, motivated professionals to feel that overcoming obstacles is possible, especially when their predecessors succeeded in this vein. Albert Schweitzer, the renowned physician responsible for his humanitarian work in Africa, served as a role model to many of the young medical providers we interviewed. An occupational therapist said that Schweitzer's work resonated with the ways in which she tried to approach work, especially “how he also would

hit obstacles and get through them and continue on, and that, even when he had dreams that some people would say wouldn't work, he continued.”

Creativity

Professionals also described creative mentors who extended the boundaries of their profession to include alternative approaches to work, integrate personal and professional interests, and make work more meaningful.

A lawyer extolled his mentor's contribution of bringing social science research into the court. He described how his mentor's innovation “transformed” how lawyers work today, expanding the tools upon which they can draw to defend their clients. He said his mentor was “really a people's attorney before that concept was popularized, representing interests that otherwise would not be represented.” The lawyer's creative method motivated his successors to find new ways of advancing one of the core principles of their field.

Professionals also cited their mentors' creativity in enriching their work with their own interests. A minister who studied public health was encouraged by a mentor to create a social network for members of his religious community; this network provided an opportunity for congregants to talk about medical needs and available resources. Similarly, an occupational therapist's graduate school professor encouraged her to integrate her passion for nature and animals into her work with patients with special needs. She created a program that brought “life from the outside” into hospitals for young children and adults, many of whom she thought would benefit from exposure to living reminders of the natural world.

Commitment

Professionals also identified mentors who showed an enduring commitment to the core mission of their profession, regardless of the current social, cultural, or political context. A young criminal defense lawyer described her supervisor's dedication to getting at the truth in a case against a well-known burglar. After looking at the client's “rap sheet,” she tried to do everything

she could to make him take a guilty plea, but he refused because he said he did not commit the crime of which he was accused. The young lawyer then felt determined to stand by her client, and was supported by her supervisor who “wouldn’t make me feel bad” for believing in this client. Seeking justice as well, the supervisor was not willing to make the client plea just to end the case. In the end, the duo prevailed: The client was not convicted. “If I think about inspirational people,” the lawyer said of her supervisor, “she is just phenomenal.”

A young geneticist remembered his advisor’s charge to think about the social impact of academic research on society and how research findings of experiments may affect individuals in society at large. In his advisor’s mind, staying committed to the profession meant thinking beyond often overwhelming daily tasks and deadlines, and always being aware of how scientific results will be interpreted by others. “I’ve learned how to think about science,” the young geneticist said. “And also that it’s important for scientists to be involved with society and to try to give their expertise to the people who need it.”

Clearly these young professionals felt inspired: They were encouraged not only to think, but also to act, on a responsibility to others and a commitment to the core mission of their field. If given the proper guidance, they aspired to high ethical and professional ideals. Without this guidance, as we have seen, young workers are left susceptible to market pressures and the appeal of superficial success.

Finding a “good” mentor

Given their significance, then, we can’t leave finding an inspirational mentor to chance. But because of limited opportunities, the fast pace of work, and other current challenges, individuals need to be proactive in seeking mentors and gaining the most from the relationship. Our study suggests four important strategies for helping young workers do that.

Recognize Mutual Interests. A valuable mentor relationship depends upon a personal connection between mentor and mentee. Sometimes mentors are assigned at schools and workplaces, but often these assignments do not take into account individual personalities, goals, and ambitions. People responsible for matching mentors with mentees should seek mutual or complementary working styles, beliefs,

and worldviews. Also, we tend to think of mentors as selecting mentees, but often selection occurs in the reverse direction. Establishing mentor-mentee relationships is a mutual identification process, whereby both the mentor and mentee have the opportunity to learn from each other.

Broaden the Search. Though the context of each workplace varies, similar tensions arise across the professions. Those who do not have an available mentor in their own profession might consider an outsider’s perspective on a challenging situation or career advice. Young professionals we interviewed often spoke of figures who had had the most influence on their upbringing, most especially their parents; they also identified teachers, instructors, and advisors who had nurtured an initial interest in a particular area of work. Thinking of these influential figures may help provide insight into how to handle current situations at work.

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Stitch Together A Persona. Some individuals we interviewed said they did not have one particular mentor—they had taken qualities, strengths, and examples from a variety of people in their lives. It may be helpful to think about how individual mentors can serve different purposes—one

person may be a good listener, another person an effective problem-solver.

Reflect on Paragons. Sometimes living role models aren’t available. In these cases, young workers can gain inspiration from a paragon or other influential figure of the past—Edward R. Murrow for young journalists, for instance, or Eleanor Roosevelt for aspiring politicians. Reflecting back on these individuals and how they navigated difficult decisions in their work may help young professionals deal with contemporary issues.

Mentor-mentee relationships are not always natural or easy. They require frequent communication, openness, and honesty about the relationship. Ongoing reflection—about beliefs, values, goals, and perspectives—can be especially revealing and helpful in nurturing valuable and productive professional relationships.

At present, we are working with students and professionals to help them identify and nurture good mentor-mentee relations. Through a series of cases and accompanying activities in a curriculum that we’ve developed called “A Toolkit for Workers in Progress,” we ask, Whom do you admire? Who are the models for good workers? What are some of their traits? How do these traits translate into standards for good work? These questions help individuals become more conscious of values and expectations that are important to them.

For just as we want to help young workers connect with an inspirational role model, we also hope to remind veteran professionals of their influence in shaping the next generation. In the happiest instances, by embodying the highest principles of their profession, veterans can produce and promote the good work on which we all depend.

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