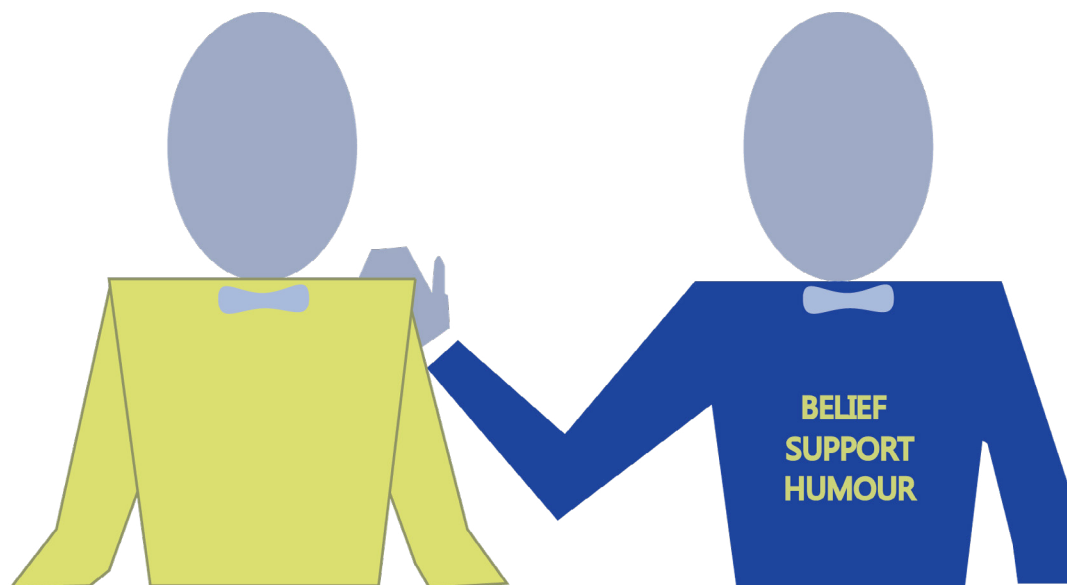


THE SUM OF THE PARTS OF A MENTOR

Sreelaja Nair

Remember Anupam Kher's character in DDLJ? Though a left field view, that character has many of the important traits I would look for in a mentor and would infuse my mentor self with. Now, for those who view mentoring as pseudo-parenting, the comparison would make a lot of sense: the character is a constitutive gain-of-function of the cool-dad phenotype. However, such a reductive view would be quite tragic for this article. That the character is a parent is incidental and irrelevant. Pertinent are the traits Kher's character manifested: **belief**, **support** and **humour**. So, what are the ideal proportions of belief, support and humour in a mentor?

As is often the case with things of immense value, articulating the particulars of it becomes difficult. Let's see if I can walk everyone through my thoughts on this. The typical expectation from **belief** as a trait in a mentor is that they believe in the mentee's ability to succeed. Of course if it was that simple every well-wisher could be a mentor. More important is a mentor's implicit belief that the mentee is confident and mature enough to know what they want. This trait is a difficult one to acquire for a mentor and an excellent self-test for all wannabe mentors. This nature of belief is also the fulcrum on which a mutually respectful mentor-mentee relationship achieves balance.



To understand the balance I allude to, one must delve into what the imbalance is. Due to the skewed seniority or expertise of the mentor, a mentor-mentee relationship teeters on the edge of a power play. With the aforementioned trait of belief, the mentor can forfeit some of that power before the start of the play. The ability to forfeit the rest of the power, on demand and in a controlled manner, is a test (another one!) of how good a mentor one could become.

The predominant non-pseudo-parenting view of a mentor is that of an advisor. In a culture where advisors are seen as know-all gurus, it is a tricky costume to wear at work. My personal realization is that the individuals I invariably turn to when I need guidance discuss rather than tell me what to do. Yet, I walk away feeling I can take on the world (yet again) after the interaction. So, how does one let someone benefit from one's seniority and expertise without telling them explicitly what to do?

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My best guess is the nature of the second trait I listed – **support**. The explicit nature of support expected from a mentor is recommending and promoting the career of the mentee. Of course every mentor does that; if one is unable to, then this juncture is

perhaps as good a time as any to introspect on whether one's role is that of a referee or a mentor (a test, again!). However, the nuanced form of support is undoubtedly an acquired trait in a mentor. I say this because it is human nature to feel compelled to tell someone what to do when approached for advice, the classic “I know this is good for you, so I think you should do this” power play. But remember, the belief component empowers the mentee to be the best judge of that.

The trait of support I refer to is in the ability of the mentor to discuss the choices before a mentee without colouring the possibilities with the “odds of success”, based on their experience and seniority. In my view, this is an important component of giving advice as a mentor: the mentor does not know if their advice will lead the mentee up the path to success or down a rabbit hole. It is important for the mentor to be aware of this fundamental drawback in their advice. This is where the controlled relinquishing of the rest of the power as a mentor comes into play. All a mentor can do is ensure that the mentee is aware of the pros and cons of their choices as well as of seeking you out as a mentor. A good mentoring discussion in the past should

enable a mentee in their present to not feel like they were unable to live up to the perceived expectations of success.

Now, after belief and support, why did I choose **humour** as the last trait in a mentor? I did so because I think Victor Borges was right when he said humour is something that thrives between one's aspirations and limitations. A mentor is one of the few individuals in one's life who is aware of the mentee's aspirations and their limitations. When the latter influences the outcome of the former, someone needs to step up and point to the mentee the achievements in the balanced middle. If the mentor and mentee can share a genuinely funny moment about a hole the mentee finds themselves in, there is always light to be found at the end of that grey tunnel.

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While writing this up, it was natural to reflect on personal experience. In my career as a researcher, I am fortunate to have mentors who personify the three traits I listed above. Once when I found myself in the proverbial hole, my mentor used some choice words (not appropriate to disclose here) to describe the situation. We laughed heartily at that outburst, but in that demonstration of spontaneous indignation I realized the depth of my mentor's belief in and support of me. I also realized that if I could acquire the right proportions of belief, support and humour, I could be a mentor someday, in every sense of the word.