

# Mentors Help Lead the Way to Success

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How long does it take to get *really good* at what you do? According to Malcolm Gladwell, famed author of *Outliers: The Story of Success*, it takes about 10 years or the equivalent of 10,000 hours of earnest practice at your craft to achieve extraordinary greatness. While we might not all be aiming for that level of exceptionality, we can still recognize the importance of dedicated practice to develop expertise in our field. Given that, it's no wonder that in their early years teachers aren't always equipped with the skills needed to be effective, successful, and comfortable.

Over the past 15 years, I've had the opportunity to mentor a variety of teachers new to the profession and college students seeking degrees in music education. Primarily, I have learned that teaching is about relationships. What follows are some other things I learned.

## **Why Mentor? Why Have a Mentor?**

Whether mentoring by choice or being cast into the role of mentor, no one can deny the importance and significance of actively mentoring those new to the profession or new to a school. A second-year teacher in essence becomes a mentor to a first-year teacher—this is undeniable and often exciting for the more experienced teacher. While the following information might appear to be intended for mentor teachers, it's also relevant for new teachers because it's important to know what they can and should expect from their mentors.

## **Don't Judge**

A mentor must not impart a self-fulfilling prophecy upon a mentee. I believe it is impossible to determine how good a teacher can become based on the early years of teaching. It is unreasonable to say or even think, "This teacher will never be any good." Thoughts like this will get in the way of the mentor's effectiveness and can become projected on a new teacher. Those new to the profession should continually be aware that becoming a seasoned educator is a process. Through this process, teachers must give themselves permission to fail, to succeed, to stumble, and to fly. A mentor teacher's role is in great part to provide hope and encouragement to their mentees and to celebrate their victories—no matter how small!

**A first-year teacher can be a good teacher.** Think about it! For what a new teacher may be lacking in information, skills, and experience, they abound in enthusiasm, energy, and excitement! Mentors must capitalize on the new teacher's positive traits and work to not diminish them. As you work with a new teacher, you must:

- **Give your time:** This is essential. The level of commitment to your mentee will most assuredly be determined by the amount of quality time spent together.

- **Give your ear:** When I have taken the time to carefully listen instead of continuously giving instruction, I have become more effective in meeting a young teacher where *they are* and consequently, together, we are able to proceed in a more beneficial way.

- **Give your respect:** A teacher must always be perceived as an expert in front of students. Always keep this in mind while observing classes and be sure to save your criticism and personal remarks for a private time.

- **Give hope:** There must always be hope.

## **The Mentor as Sherpa**

There will certainly be mountains to climb for anyone to become a master teacher. A mentor might consider themselves as a Sherpa—one who has made the climb, faced the obstacles, encountered the pitfalls, and often taken the longer, much harder route. As a mentor teacher, I must remind myself that new teachers must make the climb *themselves*. That climb can often be painful to watch, and the mentor will be motivated to jump in and rescue. However, failure is often a very effective teacher, and allowing the experience is not necessarily catastrophic. Failure can be a powerful catalyst for growth. A good mentor knows when to save a mentee from themselves and when to let them be.

## **The Most Powerful Tool**

I believe that a mentor teacher's greatest tool is to lead by example. People tend to take on qualities and attitudes of those who surround them, and this is particularly true for teachers new to our profession. I encourage new teachers to stay away from negativity and consequently immerse themselves in learning the craft. We should seek to fill our heads with creative, intuitive, and meaningful

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thoughts on teaching that propel us forward. Negative behavior tends to weigh us down and wear us out.

### *We Must Adapt*

When you mentor a new teacher, you will learn that one size does not fit all. During my experiences as a mentor teacher, many different personalities have emerged from my mentees. I find that I must adapt my mentoring style based on each person's needs and willingness to grow. Here are a few of the most common personality traits of those I have mentored. (I encourage new teachers reading this article to examine themselves as they read. This could be enlightening.)

Some teachers want you to see only certain aspects of the music program and might limit what is accomplished during a rehearsal, hoping for only the best aspects of their teaching to be revealed. As in any relationship, trust is a huge factor, and in this instance a mentor must, over time, build trust, gently and sincerely. It will take patience and time, but it is well worth it.

Other teachers, when being encouraged to try something new might respond, "Yeah, I tried that, but it didn't work!" These teachers often seem fixed on their methods and have difficulty developing a growth mindset. An effective way to mentor these individuals is to ask a series of leading questions that direct the mentee to arrive at their own conclusions. This process can be powerful in that it gives a sense of ownership to the teacher. Although this personality may seem to have all the answers, there may come a time when they confess, they need your help. At this moment a door has opened for the mentor—rush in!

Finally, there are the new teachers who just happen to be my favorites! They want to know anything and everything to help them be better teachers for their students and better leaders for their program. A mentor can be brutally honest with these teachers and assist in providing a clear

and direct path for growth. It is the fastest way up the mountain. A mentor has great liberty with these teachers,

so in the moments where criticism is needed, be sure the information you offer is demonstrable, not personally hurtful. Always leave your mentee with a sense of hope.

### *Classroom Management/Rehearsal Techniques*

Quite often an inexperienced teacher's classroom strategy is based on the idea that once the students are able to behave, only then can they be properly taught. I encourage teachers to just start teaching! The quality of the instructional content, coupled with an inspired delivery, is directly proportionate to the level of interest and excitement experienced by the students.

We teach music—one of the most exciting subjects on the planet! Ideally, our curriculum has built-in classroom

management. With a toolbox full of information and a teacher's passion, it is possible for even the less experienced teacher to successfully motivate and inspire their students.

### *Pedagogy*

A teacher's most powerful tool in the classroom is information. Information makes a teacher the expert in the room. Do everything possible to learn about the instruments you teach and the ensembles you prepare. For those I mentor, that means showing up for every pedagogical growth opportunity. Attend conferences, take lessons, observe others, read articles, watch videos, ask questions—these are imperative if you hope to acquire the knowledge and skills to become the teacher your kids deserve.

### *Professionalism*

The world of teaching requires that we be on our best behavior. We distinguish ourselves as professionals by our choices of attire and language and by the respect shown for our students, parents, and colleagues. A true professional shows up on time, prepared, and excited to teach each

**A good mentor knows when to save a mentee from themselves and when to let them be. A true professional shows up on time, prepared, and excited to teach each day... these behaviors make the world of teaching much more comfortable and satisfying. One of the most important skills necessary for any teacher is the ability to successfully communicate in an appropriate manner.**

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day. It is often difficult for those transitioning to teaching to hold themselves to these standards. However, once attained, these behaviors make the world of teaching much more comfortable and satisfying.

### ***Time Management, Planning, and Preparation***

Any teacher will tell you that using time wisely to successfully plan and prepare for classes can be a source of concern and, very often, frustration. Be sure that your mentee keeps a calendar; this sounds obvious but, surprisingly, I have worked with those who have not. Young teachers will need help with prioritizing their days, weeks, and months. This will take time and the mentor as Sherpa can lead the way, saving many missteps for the young teacher. Daily lesson plans are essential for each class. Encourage your mentee to save a particular time each day for reflection and planning.

### ***Communication***

One of the most important skills necessary for any teacher is the ability to successfully communicate in an appropriate manner. As a young teacher, I learned many hard lessons because I didn't possess the maturity and experience to make good choices with my communication. With the power of social media, I advise new teachers to strictly follow their district's guidelines.

Additionally, all written communication should be proofread by a more experienced and knowledgeable colleague. As for email, never respond to an angry email quickly. Cool off, and then pick up the phone for a more personalized conversation.

Any serious situations should be reported to the principal, so they are aware before receiving a call from a parent. Try always to take the high road.

### ***A Final Thought***

Keep in mind the relationship developed between a mentor and their mentee will be reflected in an ever-increasing sphere. Like the ripples created by a stone thrown into a pond, a mentor's influence will expand, touching many lives, perhaps for generations to come.

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