

Freddy Scholcover
Mentorship Statement

We have a running joke in many of my graduate courses. Whenever someone asks “Does X change Y?” the answer is always “It depends.” The relationship between those two variables is different, based on the context. I think that illustrates good mentorship better than anything else I can write. How do you effect change? What does it mean to be a good mentor? Well, it depends... and it depends on a lot. In any one-on-one situation where mentorship might express itself, there are three elements that need to be accounted for: the context, the mentee, and the mentor. These elements commingle, such that there is no single best act for each situation.

The mentor should be able to understand the mentee. The best mentorship comes from those who know us. Good mentorship requires an understanding of goals, both long term and short term. Once the mentee’s goals are understood, I think it then makes sense to evaluate them as a person. Not all approaches resonate the same with all mentees. I find that a lot of mentorship boils down to either emotional or career support. When it comes to emotional support, I have a technique I like to use, which I call “drown them in enthusiasm.” I find that a lot of issues really stem from a negative affective state and that a change in perspective through enthusiasm usually creates enough momentum that the mentee themselves can begin to solve their own problems... or as Eric Liu would say, they become unblocked and unstuck. However, “drown them in enthusiasm” doesn’t always work. Sometimes, a mentee just needs to feel understood and that the way they’re feeling is completely human. In those cases, understanding a mentee comes from reflecting their emotions back to them.

Much like an iced coffee isn’t good during the winter and a hot cup of joe is uncomfortable during the summer, mentorship requires understanding the context and how it relates to the mentee’s goals. Where are they coming from? What have they recently experienced? How will those elements alter how they understand and respond to different mentorship techniques? If they’re feeling down because they find their research uninteresting, enthusiasm might be the approach to take. If they’re feeling down because they’re struggling to find summer funding, enthusiasm might not be the right approach and instead, it might make sense to simply reach out to someone else who might have a lead. But, again, if they’re feeling as if they can’t find summer funding due to some internal element, finding a lead isn’t the right approach there.

Finally, the most important part of being a good mentor is to understand oneself. Being a mentor means being authentic, in that approaches you take to mentorship have to resonate with you as much as they do with your mentee. If an approach doesn’t feel natural or something that would work for you, than it’s likely to not come off as useful or authentic to the mentee. Therefore, it is much less likely to be received. The best mentorship comes from reflection on personal experience and demonstrating what you’ve learned to the mentee from previous experiences also helps them model future behavior when they are in similar situations.