The Coach as Mentor
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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the role of the forensic coach as a mentor. A significant amount of a coach's time is spent encouraging students to succeed not just in forensics, but in their academic, interpersonal and professional lives as well. Bennetts (2002) suggests there are four common approaches to mentoring; cloning, nurturing, friendship and apprenticeship. I explain these models as well as discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each as they relate to coaching forensics. The essay concludes with an overview of practical steps one can take to develop mentoring relationships with one's students. If managed well, mentoring relationships can be one of the most rewarding aspects of coaching forensics.

As forensic educators we expect to spend countless hours helping students polish their speaking and performance skills. What often takes new coaches off guard, however, is the significant amount of time one spends functioning as a "life coach." Due to the sheer amount of time we spend with our students in coaching sessions, meetings and weekend travel, it makes sense that students will gravitate toward us when they need guidance and advice in other areas of their lives. Many a scheduled coaching session can quickly develop into an hour-long discussion of the student's academic anxieties, relational conflicts, fears about the future, or numerous other personal concerns. Out of these discussions evolve forensic coaches as fundamental mentors.

Bennetts (2002) defines traditional mentor relationships as "intimate learning alliances that happen naturally" (p. 155). Buell (2004) adds a parental element to the definition of a mentor stating that a mentor is "a person who looks after, advises, protects, and takes a special interest in another's development" (p. 58). When a mentoring relationship develops between a coach and his/her student, a special connection is established beyond the shared goals for competitive success. The coach as mentor seeks to guide the student to success in all aspects of life. Although taking on a mentoring role with one's students is a significant time commitment, it can provide substantial benefits to both parties. Bennetts claims mentoring relationships can be "mutually transforming" for both mentor and mentee, as each moves toward increased self-actualization, (p. 163). Personally, my role as a mentor to students provides the most overall fulfillment as a coach. As enjoyable as it is to see them win a competition, I am far more satisfied when I watch them graduate and head off to rewarding careers and relationships.

To function as an effective mentor, a coach must identify a mentoring style. My goal in this short essay is to present several models of mentoring, briefly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each, and finally offer some practical suggestions for how to nurture a mentoring relationship regardless of the model to which one adheres.
Buell (2004) presents four common models of mentoring: cloning, nurturing, friendship and apprenticeship. According to Buell's research, the cloning model, where a mentor attempts to "produce a duplicate copy of him or herself from a top-down position," has lost favor in the academic community (p. 64). Although a generation ago this model was popular, most current educators see it as a negative approach and prefer one of the other three. I will therefore focus my attention on the nurturing, friendship and apprenticeship models.

According to Buell (2004), the nurturing model "represents a mentoring style in which a mentor fulfills some of the functions of a parent figure, creating a safe, open environment in which a mentee can both learn and try things for him- or herself (p. 65). This approach to mentoring is characterized by empathetic guidance. The mentor shows a genuine concern for the mentee, but still maintains a stance as the more knowledgeable in the partnership. The mentor's role is not to control the mentee, but rather to guide the mentee toward making wise life choices.

The advantage to this mentoring approach is that a mentor may establish trust in the relationship without risking a loss of respect from the mentee. Some level of hierarchy in the relationship can be beneficial. A coach is the leader of the team and frequently will make unpopular decisions. Maintaining an element of professional distance between yourself and students will preserve your authority, yet the care you show as a nurturing mentor helps students accept and trust your decisions. A key disadvantage to the nurturing model of mentoring is dependency. According to McAuley (2003) mentoring relationships often tap into "narcissistic aspects of self (p. 19). Students may become overly dependent on the guidance of their coach, and in turn, coaches may have trouble letting go of students when their direction is no longer necessary (Buell, 2004). Students need to learn to be independent thinkers, and coaches need to be able to recognize when a student has outgrown the mentoring relationship. Essentially, sometimes you just have to "cut the cord" so as to avoid an overly dependent and possibly self-serving relationship.

Like the nurturing model of mentoring, the friendship model is characterized by trust and care, but it is more "collaborative and co-constructed" (Buell, 2004, p. 67). The friendship approach to mentoring views mentor and mentee as peers who are equals. There is no hierarchical distance between the involved parties. Mentor and mentee view each other as close friends without the presence of any professional distance. This model is characterized by a complementary and reciprocal relationship.

Those who adhere to this model of mentoring claim the main advantage is intense trust established through a high level of intimacy. For many, this provides a more mutually fulfilling relationship. Kalbfleisch (2002) cautions that a key drawback to mentoring is loss of time for the mentor. The reciprocal nature of the friendship approach to mentoring means that the mentor is also seeking advice and guidance from the mentee. As such, the mentoring relationship is not as draining for the mentor. As a forensic coach, however, this approach to mentoring could have significant disadvantages. The loss of authority one may experi-
ence by eliminating any sense of professional hierarchy could make it difficult for a coach to maintain control over his/her team. Chaos could erupt if students feel that all decisions are open for mutual negotiation. Another disadvantage of the friendship approach to mentoring is that it may place the coach at risk for accusations of unprofessional behavior. Regardless of the level of friendship that develops between a coach and student, an organizational hierarchy of faculty-student still exists. When boundaries surrounding topics of conversation and social interactions dissolve due to the heightened level of intimacy that grows in a friendship, a coach places him/herself at risk for claims of harassment. An eighteen year old does not always interpret relationships in the way a coach intended.

Buell's (2004) research revealed an additional mentoring model that seemed to be a combination of the cloning, nurturing and friendship models. Known as the apprenticeship model, this approach to mentoring is characterized by a short-term relationship where the mentor assists in the mentee's learning process. This model is "a pragmatic, largely 'hands-off' model that involves mentoring without moving into the more personal or social aspects" evident in the nurturing and friendship models (Buell, 2004, p. 71). In the apprenticeship model of mentoring the professional relationship between mentor and mentee is key. Young et. al. (2004) argue that collegiality is crucial to a successful mentoring relationship. The apprenticeship model of mentoring lends itself to the development of collegial relationships.

An advantage of the apprenticeship model of mentoring is that it helps one avoid some of the professional and emotional risks associated with the nurturing and friendship approaches. By focusing one's mentoring efforts on the development of a student's communication and performance skills only, a coach is able to maintain some boundaries. These professional boundaries may protect the coach from exhausting him/herself emotionally, as well as lessen the risk for accusations of unprofessional behavior. Additionally, taking an apprenticeship approach to mentoring allows a coach to mentor all students equally. The expectations of the nurturing and friendship approaches to mentoring make it extremely difficult for a coach to mentor each student on a team. A disadvantage of this style of mentoring, however, is that the relationships that develop will most likely not be as interpersonally rewarding. What one gains in professional distance, one loses in interpersonal intimacy.

My intent in reviewing these mentoring models is not to suggest that a coach must select one style of mentoring and proceed accordingly. Rather, I believe an effective forensic coach should utilize the nurturing, friendship and apprenticeship models at various points during his/her career. A young coach, such as a Graduate Assistant, who may be only slightly older, the same age or even younger than students may need to err on the side of maintaining a level of professional distance. Yet, the closeness of age makes these coaches uniquely suited to the advantages of the friendship model. An element of cohesion often exists between students and younger coaches that an older coach cannot fully access. Young coaches should be cautioned, however, to be wary of how close friendships with students could harm their ability to maintain an authoritative stance.
The approach to mentoring one uses should fundamentally depend on the student involved. For example, I am cautious about developing a friendship style of mentoring with undergraduates, but I often see my mentoring relationships with graduate student coaches evolve into friendships. These students naturally develop into peers and are usually mature enough to understand the awkward issues of hierarchy involved in this style of mentoring. On a more cynical note, sometimes you simply do not get along with a student. In such cases, the professional distance of the apprenticeship model of mentoring will allow you to provide the student with guidance, but spare you the emotional energy of having to navigate a more personal relationship.

In some cases, your mentoring approach will change as a student matures. Frequently the annoying student you mentored using the apprenticeship approach when she was a freshman, matures into a delightful adult by her senior year and your mentoring relationship has become one more aligned with the friendship model. Similarly, an insecure freshman may require the nurturing approach early on in his forensic career, but by the time he is a junior he is confident and needs less emotional guidance from you.

Regardless of the model one chooses to follow, there are several practical steps a coach can take to foster mentoring relationships. The most important action is to simply provide adequate time for one-on-one discussions to occur. Ideally, coaching appointments should focus on skill development. There are, however, other coaching opportunities when mentoring can happen. I usually try to hold goal-setting appointments at the start of each semester. If I am most comfortable taking the apprenticeship approach toward mentoring a student, I keep these meetings focused on competitive goals and skill improvement. If I am drawn toward the nurturing style of mentoring with a particular student, I use these special meetings to ask the student more specific questions about his/her academics, family and future plans. When traveling, I try to fluctuate with whom I sit during team meals. This allows me to interact with several different students over the weekend. I am able to steer mealtime conversation toward topics appropriate to the type of mentoring I wish to do. I often do the same thing with whom I encourage to sit "shotgun" when I am driving. Many a career path has been planned or roommate conflict resolved during a long Interstate drive after midnight.

Some of my most cherished possessions are the hand written notes given to me by key mentors in my life. I make it a habit to give every student a card the night before the national tournament. I spend a significant amount of time writing the messages in these cards. In addition to the usual encouraging words, I also use these cards as a way to try to bring closure to some of the issues the student and I have discussed in our mentoring conversations throughout the year. For some students this means praising them for accomplishing a difficult performance skill, for others it is pointing out a growth in personal esteem or emotional maturity. The content of the notes is guided by the mentoring style I have used with the student throughout the year.

Mentoring is an important aspect of a forensic coach’s job. Although it is not what we are "officially" hired to do, it is fundamental to the success of our
programs. A coach who serves as a positive mentor for his/her students will help teach those same students to perform a similar role for others. As Gabbard (2004) states in his reflections on the importance of mentoring, "The mentor takes on additional work, but has the satisfaction that parents have when they know that grandchildren will benefit from the parenting that is taking place" (p. 54). Mentoring is a way to create a legacy of sorts. I have been extremely fortunate to have worked under the guidance of some remarkable educators. I see the positive influences of my own mentors in those students whom I have coached. In turn, after thirteen years of coaching, I have been able to see glimpses of these same influences passed on to the students of my mentees. These types of experiences always call to mind one of my favorite quotations, "What greater joy in life then to love what you do and know that it matters."
References


