Mentee Missteps
Tales From the Academic Trenches

Mentorship takes many forms, from personal and professional counseling to clinical and research guidance. The wisdom and guidance of experienced mentors not only help mentees ascend the academic ladder, but may also prevent burnout.1 Given the importance of this relationship, it is imperative that mentees put their “best foot forward.” Unfortunately, young physicians are rarely taught what is expected of them as mentees, and mentors vary in discussing “menteeship” with protégés.

Many mentees overlook the fact that they are still learning. Instead, they may feel pressure to appear immediately successful. This desire to please, admixed with paroxysmal bouts of self-doubt, may work against trainees. Rather than appear flawed—or risk displeasing mentors—a mentee may unintentionally “misstep.” These missteps could have devastating consequences, including rejection by a mentor and career implosion.

Mentee missteps are thus paths by which mentees might undermine their careers. We outline six such missteps, using colloquial names to portray extreme examples of what are otherwise common, intermittent mentee behaviors. Our aim is to help mentees self-diagnose before a single misstep becomes a pattern.

Types of Mentee Missteps
The Overcommitter
The Overcommitter is a “yes person.” Overcommitters have a difficult time refusing a request, regardless of relevance or benefit to their career. If they are able to actually fulfill all of their commitments, the end result is often disillusionment and burnout. Often, Overcommitters surpass their capacity, resulting in high-output failure typified by diminishing quantity and quality of work product.

The Ghost
“Ghosting” in US vernacular is the act of “trying to remain out of sight, especially to avoid confrontation.” In academia, ghosting occurs when a mentee hides from a mentor, hoping that poor performance will be forgotten. At best, avoidance is a temporary fix, as a mentor may assume that silence equates to progress. Eventually, evasion dooms the relationship as mistrust accumulates. Ghost mentees thus risk joining their supernatural counterparts in being rarely seen or heard.

The Doormat
Doormats are rarely noticed but often used. Despite doing most of the work, they receive little glory. Doormats often spend their time doing grunt work for their mentor. These tasks usually require extensive time and effort but offer little reward or advancement. This type of mentee may be cultivated by mentors that “malpractice”—especially those who are possessive or exploitative.2

The Vampire
The Vampire drains the lifeblood of his or her mentor. Vampires are typified by countless emails, text messages, phone calls, and meeting requests. Although these mentees are often intelligent, they are paralyzed by decision making and rely on mentors for validation. Regardless of the mentor’s generosity, the Vampire demands more, eventually forcing the mentor to sever the connection.

The Lone Wolf
The Lone Wolf appears to have no need for a mentor. This type of trainee has often succeeded previously without assistance and boldly carries forth this behavior. Although Lone Wolves may appear stubborn or confident, internally they fear asking for help lest they appear weak or foolish. This fear becomes their undoing when a preventable but highly embarrassing error occurs due to lack of guidance.

The Backstabber
By the time the Backstabber is identified, it is often too late for the mentor. Backstabbers may initially appear idyllic: they accept challenges, work hard, and perform well. However, Backstabbers are peculiar in that they resent criticism and produce excuses for every failure. This inability to accept culpability eventually leads Backstabbers to sacrifice others when errors occur, shunning blame rather than accepting responsibility.

Origins of Mentee Missteps
These characterizations represent extreme examples of what—in their mild form—are paroxysmal but highly detrimental mentee behaviors. The tendency for these missteps to occur often stems from uncertainty about—and mentors’ failure to address—mentee responsibilities. Relatively simple diagnostic and therapeutic treatment plans can help overcome mentee missteps (Table).

For example, the Overcommitter, Ghost, and Doormat share maladaptive methods of conflict avoidance. Rather than speak openly about their goals, mentees who make these missteps accept tasks in which they have little interest. Once on this path, they fear letting down their mentor and instead work tirelessly to either succeed or avoid their mentor when they fail. Conversely, The Lone Wolf, Vampire, and Backstabber suffer from lack of confidence and failure to understand the expectations of menteeship. The Lone Wolf is afraid to ask for advice and equates success with independence. This type of fixed mindset can lead to lack of
effect and poor resilience after failure.3 Vampires, on the other hand, lack confidence in their abilities and struggle when making decisions. These mentees may suffer from the imposter syndrome, a common psychological phenomenon marked by an irrational fear of being exposed as an “academic fraud” and inability to “internalize accomplishments;” despite recurrent success.4,5 Backstabbers feel that admission of failure is an attack on their personal worth. By not accepting responsibility for their mistakes, they can neither grow nor learn from them.

Revisiting Menteeship
To avoid missteps, mentees should begin by delineating personal and career goals. Explicitly stating these objectives can help minimize conflict and maximize benefit for both mentees and mentors. This exercise also enables mentors to pick projects more suited to the mentee while helping the mentee say no to tasks.6 Mentees must also embrace the fact that their role is to learn, not be perfect. Mentors and mentees should therefore reframe mistakes as improvement opportunities, not evidence of failure. When the inevitable misstep does occur, they must be addressed directly and candidly. Mentees should understand that such constructive criticism is not judgment of character, but the building blocks of future success.

Conclusions
The relationship between mentors and mentees is bidirectional and critical to academic success. However, mentees may unintentionally jeopardize this relationship when missteps occur. Awareness of these pitfalls and proactive menteeship can not only prevent failure but also propel the evolution of mentee to mentor. Those are steps in the right direction.

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