Mentoring can occur at any time and in any place. An effective mentor should be: a good listener, a good communicator, empathetic, thoughtful, and inspiring.

In my life, I have encountered many mentors. These mentors have held formal positions such as advisors, committee members, bosses, teachers, coaches, and ministers. I have also encountered many informal mentors in the form of family members, friends, coffee shop baristas, and even elderly people on park benches. These mentors, both formal and informal, illustrate one of the central themes of my mentoring philosophy: mentoring can occur at any time and in any place.

Depending on the situation, the mentor can fulfill many different roles. The Council of Graduate Schools (Gaffney 1995) offers a summary of a mentor’s multiple roles as described by Morris Zelditch (italics added):

- **advisors**, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge;
- **supporters**, people who give emotional and moral encouragement;
- **tutors**, people who give specific feedback on one’s performance;
- **masters**, in the sense of employers to whom one is apprenticed;
- **sponsors**, sources of information about and aid in obtaining opportunities;
- **models**, of identity, of the kind of person one should be to be an academic.

As a teacher of undergraduate students, a supervisor of research assistants, a senior graduate student, a daughter, a sibling, and a devoted friend and spouse, I have encountered many mentoring opportunities of various forms. These mentoring opportunities arise often during pre-arranged settings, such as scheduled meetings with students, but these opportunities also arise spontaneously. Both types of settings can be effectively used for mentoring. The trick is to recognize these opportunities when presented, and be a mentor when needed.

To be an effective mentor, five characteristics seem paramount. An effective mentor should be: a good listener, a good communicator, empathetic, thoughtful, and inspiring. My goal as a mentor is to develop these characteristics and use them to advise in both formal and informal mentoring opportunities. First and foremost amongst the mentoring characteristics is being a good listener. It is impossible to mentor a person effectively without understanding the person’s needs. It is through listening (and perhaps, more generally, observing) that we come to understand the situations unique to each mentee, which in turns allows us as mentors to adapt our mentoring style. Our mentees will be drawn from a diverse group of people; listening (and observing) allows us as mentors to understand this diversity, while understanding, in turn, can be used to incorporate diversity into our mentoring. Not all mentees will require the same style of mentoring: some mentees will need more direction than others, and other mentees may not need direction as much as confidence to follow a path they have already decided upon. Still other mentees may seek out a mentor for one aspect of their lives, when the true need for mentoring lies in another aspect of their life. Listening allows a mentor to determine the areas in which a person needs mentoring, as well as the best approach to use in the mentoring process.

Communication is the next step in the mentoring process. A mentor must communicate with the mentee, and it is essential that the communication be in a format the mentee can understand.
Traditional forms of communication should be applied (e.g. face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations), but use of non-traditional forms should also be considered (e.g. electronic communication, such as email or instant messaging) as needed. Activity based (e.g. a walk in a park, a meeting over coffee) communication could also be implemented. The key feature is to determine a format that allows the mentee to feel comfortable discussing important issues. Once a format for communication is established, it is important that communication occurs on a regular basis. Through regular communication, a rapport can be developed between mentor and mentee. A good rapport will include a mutual sense of respect and trust.

Finally, a mentor needs to be empathetic, thoughtful, and inspiring. Empathy allows the mentor to better understand the perspective of the mentee, and may allow the mentor to relate to the mentee on a deeper level. A mentor must also be thoughtful and avoid haste when mentoring. Careful consideration of the mentee’s situation as well as the potential effect that advice given to the mentee may have, is critical. Finally, a mentor must know how to inspire. Often, if mentoring is done correctly, no overt technique is needed to inspire. A mentee may feel inspired simply through conversing closely with a mentor about a topic of importance. Indeed, the best mentoring process may be one in which the mentor gives no direct advice, but instead the mentee discovers value and finds inspiration on his or her own. Other mentees may need to have inspiration given to them more overtly. For example, a mentee may not immediately see the value of an experience without more explicit discussion of benefits. Each situation will be different, and the mentor will need to listen to the mentee to gauge the next steps.

Mentoring is an ongoing process, and in many ways, mentoring is a cyclic process. Good mentoring should begin with listening and be followed with communication, instilled with empathy, thoughtfulness, and inspiration. Good mentoring should continue by re-evaluating the situation, with a return to listening to determine if the mentee is progressing. This process is necessarily adaptive, since insight into the mentoring relationship will continuously emerge. As mentioned earlier, a mentee may seek a mentor for one concern, when the true issue lies in another area. Adaptive mentoring can uncover these instances.

Good mentors know that they, too, need mentoring. Objective self-reflection may be a source of self-mentoring, but mentors also should be alert to opportunities in which they can receive mentoring, both formal and informal. The act of careful listening to mentees can be used to gauge how well the mentor’s techniques are working, while observing other mentors can be useful when adapting one’s own mentoring style. When a mentor is mindful of these opportunities to improve his or her own skills, the mentoring process will benefit.

References