

Mentoring and Precepting Lactation Consultants

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Lactation consultants advance through several stages as they develop the skills necessary for clinical practice. Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus described five developmental stages of skill acquisition a learner passes through as novice, competence, proficiency, expertise and mastery (Dreyfus, 1980). Each step builds on the previous one as the learner applies abstract principles and gains concrete clinical expertise. Patricia Benner adapted these stages to the nursing profession, identifying the five levels of development as novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert (Benner, 2001). Benner's levels are pertinent to the development of lactation consultants as well.

Every profession needs its experts to share their legacy by guiding and coaching future experts through the five levels from novice to expert. This is especially important in a clinical field where clinicians need an experienced professional to guide their acquisition of clinical skills. Professional preparation needs to address the learner's acquisition of skills as the novice clinician progresses toward expertise and an understanding patient care. Accepting the role of informal mentor or formal preceptor presents an opportunity for experts to contribute to the continued growth of the profession. Mentors and preceptors each have distinctive roles and also share many characteristics in common.

Mentor

Mentoring traditionally refers to a relationship between an experienced person who acts as a guide and role model to a less experienced colleague. A mentor is defined as a trusted counselor, guide, or coach. Typically higher up on the organizational ladder or an authority in the field, the person establishes a long-term relationship with and is interested in the learner's personal growth. Mentors analyze a learner's strengths and weaknesses, support activities to improve weak areas, and nurture the learner's professional growth by providing advice, information and support. They put the learner in touch with contacts, encourage networking, and provide introductions for building professional relationships.

Preceptor

A preceptor is a clinical instructor and coach in a formal educational relationship with a novice. Through a formal internship, the preceptor structures a learning process for the intern to achieve a set of identified skills and outcomes. Under the preceptor's guidance, the novice (intern) applies, refines, and synthesizes knowledge, technique, and skills learned in the classroom. As a role model and teacher, the preceptor presents opportunities in the work setting for learners to demonstrate increased competence while they integrate theory and practice. The preceptor helps the learner acquire clinical skills and manage the uncertainty of the clinical setting as they gain proficiency.

The mentoring relationship

Often the first step a novice takes in learning more about the profession is to approach a colleague the novice looks up to and respects. Forming a mentoring relationship will enable the novice

lactation consultant to gain insights into working in the lactation profession, have questions answered, and determine if it is something the novice wishes to pursue. Ideally the mentor will be someone other than an intern's formal preceptor or clinical instructor. Having a mentor to discuss what is happening in an intern's clinical training provides a valuable sounding board while the intern progresses through the internship. Maintaining a clear separation from the role of teacher and evaluator preserves the supportive role of the mentor. For some intern's, however, mentoring may emerge from a formal arrangement between the intern and a preceptor who continues to mentor the intern's transition from novice to expert beyond the formal learner/preceptor relationship.

Mentors and preceptors share a common goal of leaving a legacy for the future by moving others up the ladder of professional success. A foundation of trust between both partners is the key to a successful mentor-mentee or preceptor-intern relationship. It is the quality of the relationship which matters most in determining the chances for a successful outcome. Successful mentoring requires learning how to be a mentor or mentee, as well as an ongoing commitment to the mentoring process. Each partner must be willing to devote time and energy to the mentoring process. Each must have an understanding of the teaching-learning process and the expected competencies for developing from novice to expert. While not all mentors will function as preceptors, all preceptors need the same qualities as those that are desired in a mentor. Therefore, in describing qualities and relationship between a mentor and mentee, the titles are interchangeable with preceptor and intern.

Desired qualities of a mentor/preceptor:

- Acts as a role model and advocate
- Has leadership experience
- Is available and responsive
- Is willing to share expertise and insight
- Believes in the capabilities of the mentee/intern
- Motivates, supports and enhances the mentee's/intern's development
- Has vision
- Is current in their knowledge of the field
- Knows how to access professional networks
- Seeks to enhance political awareness

Desired qualities of a mentee/intern:

- Has a desire to learn
- Has a capacity to accept constructive feedback and coaching
- Has an ability to identify personal and professional career goals
- Has a willingness to take risks
- Exhibits a desire for professional success
- Seeks challenging assignments and new responsibilities
- Actively seeks the advice and counsel of an experienced mentor/preceptor

Passing on the legacy of lactation consulting

Strong, positive mentoring relationships can be fulfilling to both the mentor and the mentee. A mentee benefits from having a relationship with a lactation consultant who continually supports, guides, teaches, and challenges and challenges the mentee. Having a mentor with whom a mentee can share ideas helps the mentee to gain the skills and self-confidence necessary to excel. By sharing information and insights with members of their own profession, experienced lactation consultants

can enable others to maximize their potential, thereby improving the care of mothers and babies and ultimately strengthening the lactation profession.

Mentoring offers experienced lactation consultants an opportunity for personal and professional enrichment. Their mentoring fosters the growth and development of other lactation consultants based on a legacy which they themselves have created. Today's lactation experts were the pioneers of a lactation profession that is 20 years young. The lactation profession needs these experts to pass along their knowledge, skills, behaviors and values to less experienced individuals. The future of the profession and the continued legacy of lactation expertise and wisdom depend on it!

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