

Four Lessons to Take From Athena—Without Disguising Oneself as the Mortal, Mentor

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Introduction

Mentorship is touted as an ingredient of success, which makes intuitive sense.¹⁻³ However, often a very classic form of mentoring is assumed, one in which the mentor is a wise, sage elder. Countless keynote speakers, lecturing on the history of mentorship, display images of the eponymous Mentor, the character in *The Odyssey* to whom Odysseus himself charges with mentoring his son, Telemachus.

However, Homer would chuckle at our superficial attribution. In fact, in the actual text of *The Odyssey*, the most poignant advice to Telemachus comes not from Mentor himself, but from Athena, *disguised* as Mentor.⁴ Athena was the goddess of wisdom and warfare. Mentor was an older man, a friend of the father. Athena eschews her divinity and dynamically takes Mentor's form, playing with our notions of familiarity and appearance to most effectively mentor the young Telemachus for a life-changing quest.

At a time when all assumed that Telemachus's father, Odysseus, was dead, suitors were swarming to court the presumed widow Penelope. In disguise, Athena shared information and encouraged Telemachus not to give up on his father. This crucial advice and encouragement saved Telemachus's birthright and potentially his life. The role of Athena, often omitted in keynote addresses, upends and broadens our understanding of the source of meaningful advice: it didn't come from the assigned mentor! As we look for ideal mentorship, can we learn from this story?

Mentoring based on perceived compatibility, affect, or affinity may reinforce traditional mentorship pairings.^{3,5} However, these traditional paradigms may, in turn, magnify inequities, particularly for women and underrepresented minorities, and lock out those who need mentoring the most.^{6,7}

We must avoid traps of convergence of thought and “fit,” and instead consider Athena as mentor—being self-aware, self-effacing, and focusing on the mentee.

1. Dismantle Systemic Bias and Learn to Be a Better Mentor—to Everyone

Athena never would have been chosen by Odysseus to be a mentor to Telemachus: she was the farthest possible from his phenotype. Yet, mentorship programs often work to create mentor-mentee pairings like Mentor and Telemachus. When mentees who are underrepresented in medicine (UiM) are disproportionately assigned to UiM mentors, who themselves are even more underrepresented in faculty echelons, it may not be sustainable or advantageous to the mentor or mentee. From the mentor perspective, it leads to a “minority tax” whereby UiM faculty adopt unequal responsibility for efforts to promote diversity.⁶ This places additional burdens that may further increase systemic advantages for the majority.⁶⁻⁸ Pairings may produce disproportionate workload in areas of gender, sexual orientation, age, and family status, when exclusively concordant mentorships are sought. From the mentee perspective, if mentors are limited to a similar phenotype, mentee choices may be greatly constrained.

Although the long-term solution will be to increase the faculty UiM mentor pool, the short-term solution must include fostering relationships across the social constructs of gender, race, and ethnicity. Cross-difference mentorship may provide a mutually enriching relationship that benefits participants and the larger organization. Examples of successful professional development programs for cross-difference mentorship exist.⁹

Action Item: Develop flexible and transferrable mentorship skills and actively seek a diverse group of mentees, no matter the backgrounds. Institutions must be bold to avoid the tendency to pair like with like and instead create mentor development programs that are multidimensional.

2. Recognize Your Power as a Mentor, Its Impact on the Trainee, and the Importance of Boundaries

The power differential between Athena, a goddess, and Telemachus, a mere mortal, was infinite. Even when mentor and mentee are both mortal, a power differential between them cannot be ignored. The mentor may have, or be perceived to have, the ability to affect assessments, future job prospects, and the mentee's entire career. Once connected, mentees may feel obligated to acquiesce to mentor requests, due to fears of retaliation and loss of relationship benefits. Crossed boundaries may include meetings in nonprofessional settings, use of touch, sharing of personal information, and setting meetings outside of work hours. Some mentors may feel these actions are essential for a productive mentorship.¹⁰ Unfortunately, these actions center more on the needs of the mentor rather than the priorities of the mentee.

Don't forget those who remain unseen, as they do not possess the privilege to be present in the temples of the majority. For example, a mentor may want to offer mentorship in a particular setting (eg, a golf course, restaurant, or bar) to a mentee of the same gender but would never offer that setting to a mentee of the opposite gender because of perceived impropriety by others. While these offers might be perceived as generous, they paradoxically create inequitable opportunities by not allowing one group to be present in the offered setting. In an era when senior leaders are majority men, those most likely to be excluded from these settings and interactions with potentially influential mentors are UIM and women.

Make a commitment to all mentees for safety, equity, accountability, and boundaries. A vague open-door policy with a social threshold, one that some mentees will never cross and others eagerly cross, creates inequitable mentorship.

In *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg addresses exactly this issue and gives concrete advice to limit mentorship meetings to the workplace, with breakfast or lunch if a meal is desired.¹¹ This lifts pressure for any mentee and unburdens the mentee from choosing between mentor and personal time.

Action Item: Keep all professional mentorship meetings in professional settings, or at least in settings where all are truly welcome. Using other venues sends a message that your mentorship is not available unless mentees can conform. Create expectations that do not impede mentee personal time. Otherwise, mentees may find themselves choosing between your mentorship and other priorities such as family, friends, and health.

3. Successful Mentors Are Found at All Career Stages

Athena may have recognized that, while she had life-changing advice for Telemachus, he needed other aspects of mentorship that could be met best by others. While she was at the pinnacle, a goddess, advice and insights from the top are not always what a mentee in early development stages needs. For instance, junior trainees turn to senior mentors for career guidance but may prefer discussing work-life balance with junior faculty.¹² Creating and sharing the responsibility of mentorship through a matrix of mentors confers maximal flexibility for both mentees and mentors.

Action Item: Actively encourage mentees to seek guidance from a diverse group—a matrix of mentors. Do not assume that to be a successful mentor the pinnacle of success must have already been achieved.

4. When Appropriate, Learn to Shift to the Role of Coach

Athena did not have time to be everything to Telemachus. While mentoring relationships are often long-term and mutually beneficial, there are times when performance-driven, short-term coaching is needed; a mentee needs to interact with a coach, preceptor, or proctor.¹³ Just as Athena came in and out throughout *The Odyssey* by appearing at key times but not at others, mentors can consciously provide guidance in interrupted fashion. This mentorship can be both effective for the mentee and time-efficient for the mentor.

Action Item: Develop situational awareness regarding the mentee's needs and practice the skill of intermittent coaching for short-term challenges.

Conclusion

The path to excellence in mentorship is varied. A broad body of literature on the qualities of successful mentors and the benefits of mentorship on career advancement supports the concept that mentorship practices remain multifaceted.

We began with Homer's *The Odyssey* and Athena, a female goddess. Athena determined that, for Telemachus, a young man, to hear, digest, and act on credible and important advice, the best tactic was to take the form of the eponymous (and still traditional) Mentor. This may have been the only way that Telemachus would hear and heed her ultimately life-saving advice.

What we can most definitively take from Athena, in *The Odyssey*, is that she acted in the best interest of

TABLE

Summary of Recommendations

Tenets	Application
Dismantle systemic bias and learn to be a better mentor—to everyone.	- Develop flexible and transferrable mentorship skills and actively seek a diverse group of mentees. - Avoid the tendency to pair only like with like, and instead create mentor development programs that encourage diverse mentorship.
Recognize your power as a mentor, its impact on the trainee, and the importance of boundaries.	- Keep all professional mentorship meetings in professional settings. - Choose activities in which you could interact with any individual.
Successful mentors are found at all career stages.	- Don't assume that to be a successful mentor the pinnacle of success must have already been achieved professionally. - Encourage mentees to seek a diverse matrix of mentors.
When appropriate, learn to shift to the role of coach.	- Develop situational awareness regarding evolving needs of mentees. - Shift to intermittent coaching for short-term challenges.

Telemachus, in the form that Telemachus needed. She did not seek glory from his actions.

Unfortunately, we do not have the ability to disguise ourselves as Athena did, to adopt a form that will be most palatable for mentees. We must effect the same change while being comfortable in our own skins and selves. The 4 action items described here allow us to figuratively take the form of the Mentor our mentees most need, expand our pool of mentees, and potentially increase access to those lacking mentorship under traditional models (TABLE).

We must recognize the barriers—both actual and perceived—to a healthy, effective mentorship between 2 individuals who differ in characteristics such as gender, age, race, or ethnicity. Then we can work to reconcile these differences, to create equitable, iterative, and responsive mentorship.

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