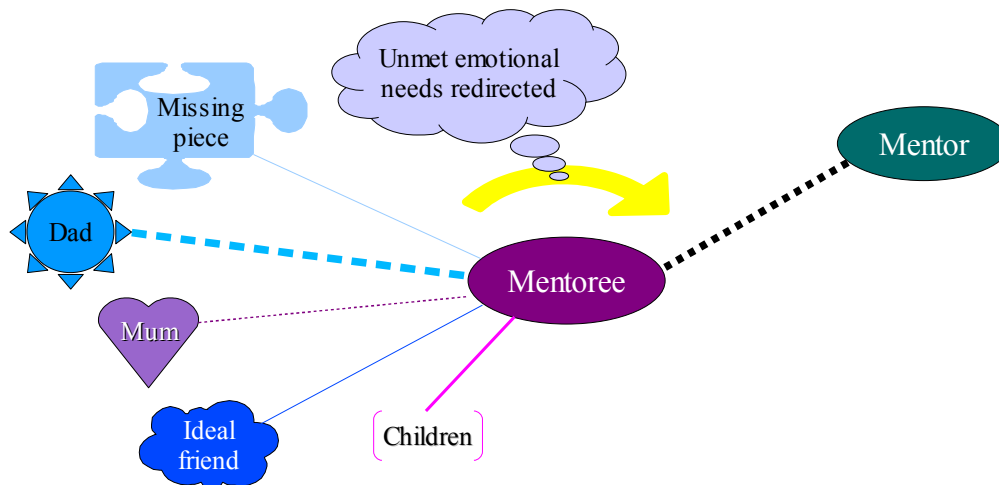


When mentoring gets awkward

Dealing with transference in the mentoring relationship



Transference is the unconscious redirection of emotions from a mentoree to their mentor. These emotions may be positive or negative. They have usually been attached to 'significant others' in a mentoree's life. This can be a parent, a marriage partner, a close friend, even a child. Where there are unmet needs in these relationships, disappointments or misunderstandings, it is easy for emotions to be redirected to someone who appears to be able to meet these needs.

We all experience some aspects of transference, and it occurs in many areas of life. Transference is not necessarily a problem but it can create role confusion in relationships - especially in helping relationships like mentoring, counseling, pastoral care, and spiritual direction. The particular difficulty in mentoring arises from the personal commitment a mentoree senses in the mentor, the deep personal knowledge that comes from sharing the mentoree's whole life story, and the promise of support and assistance to grow.

Transference can also be more of an issue when there are dual relationships between mentor and mentoree (i.e. friend, team-member, relative, etc). Where neither mentor nor mentoree are clear about their roles, the transference issues can become acute.

10 potential indicators of transference

- Your mentoree is anxious for your approval, fishing for compliments or worried about upsetting you.
- Your mentoree raises questions about your own personal life, or begins to see him/herself as your 'confidante'.
- Your mentoree becomes protective of you in relation to others' comments. They become your advocate in external situations.
- Your mentoree finds it difficult to accept you have faults, make mistakes or don't do things perfectly. The mentoree treats you as guru and takes everything you say as the

final word of authority on a matter.

- Your mentoree begins to connect excessively for advice or support about personal matters rather than waiting for a session.
- As a mentor, you begin to find it hard just to be 'yourself' around the mentoree. If you feel the need to 'walk on eggs', this is a potential indicator of transference occurring.
- As a mentor, you feel you cannot disagree or 'carefront' your mentoree.
- Your mentoree is overly concerned about your appearance and health if you are 'not at your best'.
- Your mentoree expects special privileges in relation to time of appointments, schedule changes, short notice.
- Your mentoree is concerned about your mentoring of others and becomes jealous of time spent with others.

The impact of transference

- The problem with transference is the way it complicates the mentoring relationship. The mentoree may not share certain things and begins to withhold information or shifts the emphasis of what is dealt with.
- The mentoring relationship may become sticky or awkward necessitating reflection and addressing what is going on in the relationship.

Dealing with transference

- Discuss all potential concerns about the dynamics of your mentoring relationships with a supervisor for perspective and advice. Share the little 'niggles' of suspicion.
- Clearly differentiate any multiple roles with a mentoree and articulate together the way these should work.
- Reflect on the working of a transference situation before addressing it.
 - a) Ensure it is substantive and real, not simply a one-off situation for the mentoree or imagined on your part.
 - b) Ensure that you have not fostered it as a mentor (i.e. counter-transference - this is when you also have needs that are being redirected into the mentoring relationship and these connect with the mentoree's needs.)
 - c) Gain clarity with a supervisor (reflect on the relationship based on actual situations) and plan together your interaction with your mentoree to deal with it.
- Share your concerns as a mentor about how the relationship feels like it is changing and your concern about the potential impact on the success of mentoring.
- Reaffirm the mentor - mentoree roles and negotiate some caring but clear boundaries.
- Take initiative at maintaining the boundaries and be accountable for this to your supervisor.