

The Best Mentors Think Like Michelangelo

by W. Brad Johnson and David G. Smith

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Summary. Michelangelo approached the craft of sculpting with the humble conviction that a unique and beautiful piece of art already existed within the stone, and his job was only to release it. The best mentors approach their art in the same way: helping mentees... [**more**](#)

Michelangelo approached the craft of sculpting with the humble conviction that a unique and beautiful piece of art already existed within the stone, and his job was only to release it. We think the best mentors approach their art in the same way.

Social psychologists have already confirmed that in the best romantic relationships, partners sculpt one another in such a manner as to bring each person closer to their ideal self — the person they want to be. Termed the *Michelangelo phenomenon*, a skilled and thoughtful relationship partner becomes committed to first understanding and then reinforcing or drawing out another's ideal form. But a skilled mentor can also affirm another's ideal self — that unique, promising, but vulnerable form that might be hidden from view.

How exactly does a mentor develop a vision of the mentee's ideal self? As it turns out, it's all about the art of affirmation. Evidence reveals that two distinct components of mentor affirmation come into play. First comes *perceptual affirmation*. Excellent mentors are intentional about taking the time to truly “see” their mentees, understanding — and accepting — both their authentic real selves *and* their ideal selves and imagined career destinations. This takes time and patience. A mentor must earn trust, be accessible, and listen generously. Here is the key: Once a mentee's ideal self becomes clear, the mentor must consistently endorse the mentee's vision.

The second element involves *behavioral affirmation*, helping mentees to engage in behaviors aligned with their ideal selves. Having gained a window into whom a mentee dreams of becoming, a mentor opens doors and conjures the opportunities the mentee will require to get there. For example, when Franklin's perceptions of and behavior toward Shawna are congruent with Shawna's ideal, Franklin will sculpt toward her ideal: He will elicit behaviors and dispositions that are consistent with Shawna's ideal self. Over the course of frequent interactions during which Franklin elicits her ideal self, Shawna will flourish, moving closer to what she would like to be.

It can be a challenge for mentors to use the Michelangelo

approach when they're mentoring someone of the opposite gender. This is especially true for male mentors and female mentees, which is a more common pairing than the reverse. The truth is that men are still more likely to hold senior leadership positions in most organizations, and thus make up most of the mentors.

Research on cross-gender mentoring reveals that women face more barriers in finding a mentor, and that even when they do, they may reap a narrower range of professional and psychological benefits. One reason for this may be that when it comes to key interpersonal skills such as listening, men sometimes struggle with the sort of active listening required to help a mentee gradually unearth her ideal self.

Can men truly channel Michelangelo and mentor women with the humility and patience described above? Our study of male-female mentorships at work suggests that the answer is yes, but only if men work hard at understanding some of the features of socialized masculinity that often interfere with good cross-gender mentorships.

First, almost all mentors have an inclination to clone themselves in their mentees. That is, they — often unconsciously — push mentees to pursue career trajectories and make life or career decisions that mirror their own. Although ego-gratifying for the mentor, cloning is about as far from genuine Michelangelo affirmation as one can get.

While this is true of both male and female mentors, in our experience it can be harder for male mentors to overcome because of the way men and women are socialized to listen, and the ways that women are (generally) more relationship-oriented, while men are (again, generally) more task-oriented. To avoid this instinctual cloning tendency, men have to work hard at *really*

listening to the women they mentor, focusing on the relationship more than the specific task being discussed. Men also have more of a tendency to jump to fixes and solutions in conversations with a mentee rather than taking the time to listen, understand, and appreciate her perspective.

Men who aspire to Michelangelo-like mentorship for women can also get waylaid by troublesome gendered *assumptions* about mentees. We all fall prey to assumptions. If you are a man reading this, quickly complete the following sentence: *She's a woman, therefore, she must want _____, she must be planning to _____, and she probably has no interest in _____*. If, upon reflection, some of your answers make you cringe, you are not alone. Even well-intended assumptions can backfire.

Consider the example that Robert Lightfoot, acting director of NASA, shared with us about how assumptions got him off track at one point:

I was really fortunate early in my career to have a “tipping point” experience in this area. I was on a selection committee. One of the other members of the committee was one of my own mentors, a woman. Very quickly, the committee reached consensus on a selectee. As we went around the table to discuss her, I made the comment: “This job requires a lot of travel, and she just had a baby. I don’t know, this would really be tough for her if she were hired.” Fortunately, my mentor looked across the table at me and said very clearly, “That’s not your decision to make! She knows she has to travel, she knows she just had a baby, don’t you make the decision for her.” That hit me like a ton of bricks.

Another crucial element on the path to affirming a mentee’s ideal

vision of self and career is honest-to-goodness *gender humility*. This is the art of being self-aware and humble about everything you don't know about women generally and about your mentee's experience as a woman specifically. Authentic gender humility requires genuine curiosity about her unique experiences and concerns, transparency about the limits of your understanding, and the capacity for expressing empathy as she feels comfortable revealing her dreams for the future.

Here is a caveat. Should a mentee appear to be aiming too low or selling herself short, an engaged mentor will paint a more ambitious and inspiring vision of her potential, including previously un contemplated possibilities. Great mentors are often given to crafting bold, even audacious pictures of where a mentee can go in their career. For instance, Sandy Stosz, a Coast Guard three-star admiral, recently told us:

[My mentors] gave me opportunities I hadn't thought about. They gave me a chance to look beyond what I had as my vision, which was just becoming a sailor and commanding a ship one day. They helped me look at a bigger picture, not just the Coast Guard but the entire Department of Transportation. Those two men showed me that there's more out there than just settling for going to sea, that there are special jobs and possibilities I hadn't even considered.

In the end, a great mentor will honor the mentee's ideal self and career dream (not the one he's invested in or the one that mirrors his own career). Thoughtful sculptors use the tools of patient listening, Socratic questioning, unconditional acceptance, and generous affirmation to help draw forth the dream, name it out loud, and then set about championing mentees' efforts to get there.

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