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Mentoring in An Impostor World: An analysis on the effects of mentors on mentee and the
impact of mentor disclosure

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Introduction

The recent push for mental health awareness has led to a multitude of mental health campaigns and increased awareness. The continual push and societal climate of mental health awareness has shed light on topics such as impostor phenomenon (IP). Popular news sources, such as Time have released articles and helpful videos on IP, with the intent to spread the word on IP and its symptoms (Abrams, 2018). The popular site Forbes has also jumped on the IP bandwagon, with articles such as “The Imposter Phenomenon: Why The Best Feel Like Frauds” (2018). The popular business site used IP in a unique framework and applied it to the area of business and lack of preparation to make the hardest sale of an individual’s career: personal skills (Nasher, 2018). The continual increase of mental health awareness could mean increased popularity for IP, as increased use could cause it to become a well-known buzz word.

A current buzz word that is often talked about in the professional world is the term mentorship. Popular sites constantly share articles on tips and tricks for the best mentoring and why mentoring is worth all of the hype. CNBC explains how mentorships allows for everyone, including the company to benefit and “win.” (Dhanusha, 2017). This mindset that mentoring benefits everyone has shifted the idea that mentoring is an interpersonal relationship between two individuals. Numerous educational institutions have adapted the popularity of mentorship and now boast about their topnotch mentorship programs with faculty offered to students. The School of Business at the University of Kansas proudly elaborates on their mentorship program that pairs alumni with students, allowing the opportunity for the student to have connections with an individual with experience in their future profession (School of Business, 2019). Although

mentorship is not a new concept, the idea of those who benefit from mentoring is being expanded, and with it the importance of mentoring.

Literature Review

Impostor Phenomenon Background

The term IP was originally coined in 1978 by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in their influential paper, which analyzed women who had obtained high success, but were incapable of internalizing their achievements and felt as if their success was deceiving (Schubert & Bowker, 2017). Clance developed the IP scale that is self-executed and analyzed results through a Likert type scale (Holmes, Kertay, Adamson, Holland, & Clance, 1993). Impostor phenomenon is classified as a feeling of dishonesty or deception that are felt by high achieving individuals who personally conclude that their accomplishments, they have achieved are unwarranted and fraudulent (Chandra, Huebert, Crowley, & Das, 2019). Previous studies have observed IP in medical students (Chandra et. al., 2019), academic faculty (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017), the STEM field (Chakraverty, 2018), and other specific fields prominent with high achieving individuals. The study of IP continues to expand, and IP researchers have observed trigger points (Hutchins, & Rainbolt, 2017), role support plays (Gardner, Bednar, Stewart, Oldroyd, & Moore, 2019), identity and attribution (Chakraverty, 2018), and coping mechanisms (Gardner et. al., 2019). Although, the role of mentorship and peer support was discussed, and IP is studied in a wide variety of disciplines, the effect of mentoring has on IP has not been fully explored.

Previous Perceptions of IP

Although impostor phenomenon can impact any high achieving individual in any field, the primary of research found focused on health care and academics. The stark contrast between the medical field and the culture of academia revealed differences in the understanding of

impostor phenomenon. The impostor phenomenon is in the setting of health care professionals the affect the medical lens has on the interpretation on the impostor phenomenon can be exuberated from the first two words of the title: "*Imposter Syndrome*." The term syndrome is defined as, "a group of signs and symptoms that occur together and characterize a particular abnormality or condition" (Merriam-Webster, 202, Def. 1). In contrast, the term phenomenon is defined as, "an object or aspect known through the senses rather than by thought or intuition" (Merriam-Webster, 2020, Def. 1). It is evident that use of the word syndrome implies a medical abnormality that can be treated. These terms, appear interchangeable, but directly affect the interpretation of IP. The perspective of IP as a syndrome stifles the focus of many research articles. An emphasis is placed on the effects on psychological and physical wellness, and connections are drawn to mental illness (Chandra et. al., 2019). The conceptualization of IP in a form that it can be cured upon diagnosis, can be accredited to the researchers of articles such as the one stated above being medical professionals themselves.

In contrast, the research that focused on the academic field, focused on mechanisms of support, triggering events, opportunities for growth (Hutchins, & Rainbolt, 2017). Through researching the impact that outside events, such as role transitions or criticism on academic journal submissions (Hutchins, & Rainbolt, 2017), IP is seen as a result of these stressful situations, and not through internal feelings and emotions. This shifts the assumption that an individual who struggles with IP is responsible for the feelings of inadequacy they are causing themselves to feel and instead implies that IP is the result of a high-paced, performance driven, stressful environment. This study does not focus on one specific field of interest, but rather emphasizes the role of mentorship in relation to IP, however this background knowledge on IP in the role of health professionals is important to note because it assist in an understanding of how

IP is perceived in different areas. Although this study does not focus on one specific field of interest, there is still potential for participants to members of the health professional field. Thus, it is pertinent to understand the bias associated with specific areas of study in relation to IP.

Impostor Phenomenon Coping Mechanisms

From the extensive research on IP it can be concluded that individuals who suffer from IP experience similar thoughts of self-doubt and fear of being discovered as a failure. Seeing as every individual is unique, there are a wide variety of coping strategies for IP, but not a cure all, seeing as IP cannot be cured and the experiences can only be decreased. Many coping strategies for IP have been proven to show success and benefits. Despite proven success with IP coping strategies, a large majority of individuals with IP do not seek out coping strategies and instead endure the pain of IP on their own (Chandra et. al., 2019). This is attributed to the central idea of IP as being discovered as a fraud (Chandra et. al., 2019). Although perfectionism is a lofty goal, it is often not realistic, thus, a goal to assist in those who struggle with IP is to remember that it is important to focus on the positive (Persky, 2018). In another study, several of the IP coping strategies that were identified were, “cognitive escaping,” “masking,” and “giving and seeking social support” (Gardner et. al., 2019, p. 5). “Cognitive escaping” is categorized as the idea of “engaging in alternate activities or roles in another context.” “Masking,” is “creating an image of competence by modifying behavior when interacting with others. “Giving social support,” is “reaching out to someone else in the program that is struggling.” Lastly, “seeking social support” is defined as talking to others in order to receive help or emotional support” (Gardner et. al., 2019, p. 5). In contrast to men, women more commonly rely on seeking social support to cope with IP (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

Women as Impostors

Both men and women suffer from IP, however, women internalize their success differently. In general, men categorize their successes to themselves and their skills, in contrast, women inherently project their successes outward to variables such as chance (Clance, & Imes, 1978). A large struggle that those who have experienced IP is rooted in the contradiction of roles and the norm, therefore gender roles play a pivotal role. These gender roles, which are expectations of society, play a role in shaping a personal identity (Badawy, Gazdag, Bentley & Brouer, 2018). It is also important to note that previous research has contradicted one another in whether gender affects IP. Although some research has found that women experience IP more, this has not been supported fully (Cusack, Hughes, & Nuhu, 2013). Current research has worked to support the idea that women experience IP more and have supported this notion with the idea that women have the pressures of multiple roles in their life that they attempt to excel in, this can cause IP in women (Cusack, Hughes, & Nuhu, 2013). Although there has been much research done to analyze IP, there is little to no research on IP in connection with mentorship.

Definition of Mentorship

To mentor is the practice of coaching, advising, guiding emotions, and developing a cultivated relationship that is continual (Mijares, Baxley, & Lou Bond, 2013). This theoretical definition is different from the operational definition of mentoring which states that mentoring is subjective to that of the mentor and mentee and emphasizes that mentoring is not objective, rather, it is abstract (Mijares, Baxley, & Lou Bond, 2013). Although mentoring is often viewed as exclusive, it can be synchronously; filling disparate areas of those in the mentorship (Saletnik, 2018). The ratio of the benefits of not fulfilling the norm of a 1:1 relationship for mentor and mentee is also supported by other researchers and experts in the field of mentoring. For instance,

a mentor could easily have more than one mentee, and a mentee could have more than one mentor (Wadhwa, Nagy, Chhabra, & Lee, 2016).

A relationship between a mentor and mentee is not stagnant and undergoes four changes through the relational development and evolvement of the mentor. The first stage is Initiation, which commences in the first months of the mentorship (Kram, 1983). In this first stage, the mentor is viewed as all-knowing resource of support for the mentee's opportunities and growth. The mentor's actions reflect this view of knowledge and support and allows for the mentee to feel looked after (Kram, 1983). Cultivation, Kram's (1983), second stage of mentorship, is the first years of the relationship. In this stage the assumptions of the mentor are tested. Through the continual development of the relationship, the connection deepens and grows stronger and psychosocial variables, such as, role modeling develops (Kram,1983). The third stage, which is a pivotal platform of change, is separation. As with changes in any relationship, some anxiety can be felt by the mentee. It is also important to note that separation can happen both physically and psychologically, both affecting change in the relationship by shifting to the idea of self-reliance (Kram, 1983). The final stage for Kram (1983), is redefinition, which in simplest terms is defined as friendship. Thus, the mentee is viewed as peer by the mentor. Kram's (1983), four stages of mentorship indicate that there are clear expectations of the mentor and the objectives that the mentee will learn and develop from the relationship.

Mentoring and IP

While social support was often referenced as coping mechanism, mentorship was not explicitly stated as a coping mechanism. However, the effects of mentoring on mentees with IP has been explored briefly in several studies. In a previous study that analyzed IP in higher education faculty, 83% of participants indicated that they had a mentor (Hutchins, 2015). The

common theme of having at least one mentor supports the importance of mentoring as a form of social support for those who have IP. Although it is previously assumed that mentors openly discuss IP struggles and coping strategies with their mentees, this is not the case (LaDonna, Ginsburg, & Watling, 2018). From the same study stated above, 33% percent of the individuals surveyed stated that they disclosed their IP concerns and thoughts with their mentor (Hutchins, 2015). Therefore, in order to best support mentees who struggle with IP, mentors may need to instigate this topic of conversation to create a space that is conducive to sharing IP struggles and challenges. Another way that mentors can show support is through encouraging their mentees to use coping strategies that personally work for them (Armstrong, & Shulman, 2019). Thus, while previous studies have analyzed the disconnect between mentees with IP and mentors, and skills that mentors should use to assist their mentees. The research questions for this study is as follows:

RQ1: Do participants' mentors have an impact on their success, and if so, how do the participants describe the impact?

RQ2: Does mentor disclosure have an impact on mentee success?

Method

This study analyzed how individuals describe the impact their mentors have had on their success. This section of the research paper explains the process used to conduct the research and highlights how the research question was tested. Participants were asked to take part in a brief online survey; with the option to opt out at any time throughout the process. The survey was constructed through Question Pro and consisted of Likert-scale questions and short answer. Each question was optional, and therefore, full completion of the survey was not required. The survey was administered through an online link that was made available through a variety of social

media platforms. The completion of the survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. All responses to questions were kept anonymous.

Previous Research with The Clance IP Scale

A section of the survey was structured to administer the Clance IP scale. Sample questions from the IP scale include “I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task,” and “I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.” The answer selection process followed a likert-scale with answer choices readings as “1: not at all true, 2: rarely, 3: sometimes, 4: often, and 5: very true.” The Clance IP scale has been utilized in different research studies from diverse fields of study. For instance, Chromey (2017), conducted a study connecting IP to an effective communication channel and impression management techniques. In addition to being utilized as a tool to assist in high impact practices in the educational setting, the IP scale has also been used in the professional medical field. Research using IP in the medical field has analyzed the potential link between surgical burnout and IP (Leach et al., 2007). This survey attempts to analyze the gap between the potential correlation of mentorship and IP.

Study Demographics

The sample size of study was made up of 100 participants with 19.08% male, 79.39% female, and 1.53% identifying as other. The majority of the participant population identified as white, with the percentage being 91.11%. Asian was the second biggest demographic with 2.96%. American Indian or Alaska Native and Hispanic or Latino both had 2.22% and Black or African American or Other both had 0.74% with one individual identifying as Middle Eastern. In regard to age demographics, the population was compromised with the majority of 69.47% 18-24 year old's, followed by 14.5% 25-34 year old's. The third highest age range was 65+ with

5.34%. The age range of 35-44 had 4.58% followed by 45-54 and 55-64 which both had 3.05%. The final demographic question which was unique to this study showed that 50.38% of participants had a personal mentor and 32.06% were a personal mentor to a mentee or mentees.

Analysis of Results

The qualitative data, which was from the short answer questions, was analyzed through a multistep thematic analysis. The first step of the qualitative data analysis was an initial read through. Next, the data was color coded with correlating themes and then organized into an Excel spreadsheet. This process was repeated three times to ensure validity is verified in another manner. The themes were organized in two sections, one was major themes that were made up of multiple codes that were connected, and minor themes which were specific codes and not connected to others. The structure of data coding followed the format of first and second data coding methods. In the first coding the data was analyzed by line by line, which is the same as initial coding (Saldana, 2013). The themes were then reviewed by an outside moderator to assist in the elimination of research bias.

Results

Clance's IP Scale

Participants of the study were asked to complete Clance's IP Scale after the general demographic questions. The scores from the participants IP scales were added together, and it was determined that the frequent IP test score was 68.29. According to Clance's scale, "a score between 61 and 80 means the respondent frequently has impostor feelings" (Clance, 1983). Therefore, survey participants suffered from IP at a rate higher than average, seeing as, "the higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the Impostor Phenomenon interferes in a person's life" (Clance, 1985). These feelings of IP are indicated throughout the response's

participants shared. For instance, one participant stated; “I see my accomplishments whether they be a degree, award, or note, etc. at my desk constantly, but could point at each one of those and tell you why they thought I did a better job than I did, and don’t actually deserve the praise.”

This individual recognizes that they have many successes and accomplishments but do not believe they are worthy of them. Instead, of feeling proud of their successes, they indicate feelings of guilt and trickery. Another participant stated how IP had followed her throughout her education and now career; “In graduate school and even now in my career, I feel like I’m constantly “faking it until I make it.” I definitely feel like I’m on the low end of intelligence for someone with a Ph.D. I’m constantly worried I’m not capable of producing enough scholarship to maintain in this field.” This participant shares a similar narrative of not being worthy of accomplishments. However, they also express anxiety towards continuing to produce work worthy of achievements and fear they will not be able to survive in their field, despite their previous successes. The feelings and thoughts of IP are expressed often and consistently throughout the survey, indicating the negative impact IP can have on individual personally and in their respected career field.

Research Question 1

The first research question of the study which focused on the impacts of mentorship. The themes categorized from the open-ended survey question which asked: “Has having a mentor impacted your success? If yes, please explain. Do you feel like your mentee has been successful and if so, do you feel you have been impactful in their success?” Two main themes emerged from the question responses; positive impact on mentee and mentor serving as a guide. Finally, the theme of encouragement and support was categorized from the survey question; “Are there tools/tactics your mentor has used to help you feel more confident in your own ability? If yes,

what are they? If you are a mentor what tools/tactics do you use to make your mentee feel more confident.”

Positive Impact on Mentee

The theme positive impact on mentee was categorized as when the mentor believes they have been a positive impact on the mentee through support etc., but also believes that the mentee themselves have done the work to grow and be successful. Thus, emphasizing that the mentor has impacted the mentee, but a large majority of growth and development must be attributed to the hard work and dedication of the mentee. One participant stated;

Those that have mentored me have encouraged me to have more confidence in myself and my decisions...I know that I have been impactful in my mentees success, although I never know whether they are successful because of something I said or did, or just because I was there.

This quote indicates the complex relationship dynamics between a mentor and mentee. They state clearly at the start that their mentor positively impacted their success through helping their confidence and then falter with discussing their own role in the success of their mentees. The individual recognizes that they have been impactful in the success of their mentees but are unsure as to what actions they took that were beneficial.

Throughout the categorizing of the responses it became apparent that participants did not struggle to find the words to explain the positive impact their mentor had but struggled to explain how they were impacting their mentee. One participant stated;

Yes, having a mentor has impacted my success. Mentors become a sort of fallback in the sense that they believe in you even when you don't believe in yourself. Knowing that someone has hope in my potential has made me more confident in myself.

Here, this mentee explains the impact the mentor has had on them and explains more in depth how their mentor has assisted them, and what their support meant to them. It is clear from this theme that mentors impact success, however, it can be difficult to measure to what degree, or in what way a mentor impacts their mentee. Throughout the responses of this theme, mentors indicated they hoped that had a positive impact on their mentee, and mentees also echoed this hope by stating they hoped to have this impact as a mentor. Although at times mentors did doubt the impact they had, they did recognize that their mentees had been successful and had grown while they had been connected to them.

Mentor Served as a Guide

The theme of the mentor serving as a guide was categorized when either the mentor or mentee referenced how the mentor had assisted in guiding the mentee through challenges, situations, or giving tips and tricks. Quotes assigned to this category stated tricks that their mentor had taught them to overcome challenges and how their mentor had served as a guide. One mentee explained how their mentor had been a guide to them;

I think just having someone there to guide you in certain tasks really aids in the achievement of those specific tasks. Not that they're undertaking it alongside me, but moreover they're giving me and tips and remaining ambiguous in order to help me realize my own success.

This participant explained that they did not expect their mentor to complete their work for them but appreciated their assistance and support along the way. They also indicated that they valued tricks and tips that their mentor gave them as assistance. Another survey participant described how their mentor was there to help them problem solve stating; "It is nice to have someone to go to when I have a problem or need advice. I value their experience and that they have my best

interests at heart.” This response indicates a bond of trust that has helped the mentee to feel comfortable coming to their mentor for advice and support. Although many mentees indicated they were not afraid of facing challenges, they were relieved to have an experienced individual who could guide and support them as they progressed and grew. In addition, mentees also valued the tools that their mentors taught them and explained how they had helped them to continue to grow and evolve.

Encouragement and Support

Encouragement and support were the second most frequent theme of the survey question; “Are there tools/tactics your mentor has used to help you feel more confident in your own ability? If yes, what are they? If you are a mentor what tools/tactics do you use to make your mentee feel more confident?” The framework for this theme was categorized as when a mentor would continually encourage, reassure, and support the mentee through challenges and successes. Encouragement and support could be categorized as verbal, strength based, or other techniques of support. One participant explained how their mentor’s focus on their personal strengths helped them stating; “My mentor has helped me to focus on my strengths and look at how to reframe opportunities in a positive manner. As a mentor, I focus on helping my mentee create a plan to accomplish things.” Through a strengths-based approach this participant felt supported by their mentor and was able to have a new perspective when pursuing opportunities. This participant also stated how they support their mentee through careful planning leading to completion of goals.

Another common form of encouragement and support was in the form of words of affirmation. One individual shared;

I feel like my mentor has done a good job in giving words of affirmation that helps me remain confident in my ability. They have often had to talk me off the edge sometimes, as I have gotten worked up over failures.

In this quote this individual explains how simple words of encouragement have boosted their confidence and kept them from diving off the deep end in times of failure. In a similar response another participant shared the importance of words of encouragement stating; “I have had many mentors throughout my life. They often provide advice and encouragement when I doubt myself or my abilities. I frequently seek affirmations and perform better with positive feedback.” This participant indicated that words of affirmations not only helped eradicate their self-doubt but also had a positive impact on their performance. Although the types of support and encouragement that the mentor offered varied, majority of mentees felt as if their mentor had encouraged them and supported them through their trials and tribulations.

Research Question 2

The second research question of the study asked; Does mentor disclosure have an impact on mentee success? This question was answered from a theme of the survey question; “Are there tools/tactics your mentor has used to help you feel more confident in your own ability? If you yes, what are they? If you are a mentor what tools/tactics do you use to make your mentee feel more confident.” The main theme of mentor disclosure indicated the importance of how sharing struggles can assist a mentee in feeling supported and encouraged. This theme was both supported by responses from mentors and mentees.

Mentor Disclosure

The theme mentor disclosure was categorized when mentees indicated that having a mentor who they view as successful disclose past struggles helped the mentee feel encouraged

and was reassuring. Mentees often stated throughout the theme that knowing someone who was successful had past failures, allowed them to recognize that perfection was impossible, and failure could be used as tool of encouragement. One participant stated; “It has helped me when my mentor relates to my struggles with their own and shows what successes and joy has come from struggles.” Through shared struggles that related to the mentees’ experiences, this mentee was able to recognize that challenges can have a positive outcome. Another participant of the study, who indicated they were a mentor, focused on normalizing failure stating;

For my mentees I try to discuss how I struggle as much as possible. I want them to recognize that I am human and if I am offering advice on a particular topic it is likely because I have failed in some capacity and would like to prevent that for them.

This mentor normalized failure and explained through sharing their personal struggles how they were human and had made mistakes in the past. In addition, they indicated that they would offer advice in areas that they had struggled or failed in to prevent their mentee from experiencing their same mistakes. Through mentor disclosure, the idea of failure was reframed and normalized, thus reducing anxiety and feelings of perfection. Mentors were able to help their mentee recognize that failure is part of the learning process and helps develop many useful skills and tools. In addition, mentor disclosure created a deeper connection between mentors and mentees.

Discussion

Previous research that has been conducted about IP has focused heavily on trend analysis and the negative impact IP has on the individual. IP has been an identification factor in recognizing individuals who have an increased potential risk of leaving institutions such as universities, it is imperative that the trends of IP continue to be analyzed to assist in recognizing

IP and developing an environment that allows the ability for all to succeed in (Parkman, 2016). The effects of IP on high achieving individuals can be detrimental. IP can negatively impact an individual's ability to analyze their own successes and achievements (Kets de Vries (2005); Want & Kleitman, 2006). Although the main focus of this study was on the potential impact of mentorship, Clance's IP scale was administered in the survey to assist participants with a clear understanding and self-identification of IP. While a dense amount of research has been conducted on IP and mentoring, there is limited sources available that studied both IP and mentorship congruently.

As a result of this study not specifically only focusing on IP, an interesting take away from the results of this study was participants' hesitation to self-identify as someone who struggles with IP because of the term "high achieving." Participants began the survey with the impression that the main topic would be the effects of mentoring, introducing the IP scale first and then following with the definition of IP caused some hesitation in participants who had not interacted or heard of IP prior to partaking in the survey. Clance's definition of IP highlights terms such as "intellectual phoniness" and "high achieving." (1978). Several participants indicated struggling with identifying themselves as "high achieving." Thus, future studies could research if the term "high achieving" serves as a barrier for individuals who self-assign themselves as an impostor.

This study analyzed the potential impact mentoring had on participants. It focused specifically on the impact on personal success, and tools/tactics used by the mentor to improve confidence in the mentee. Previous research has analyzed mentoring and the structure of mentoring. For instance, Kram (1983) labeled and categorized mentoring into four phases that explained the structure of mentoring. In addition, Kram and colleague Isabella (1985) also

described that there were two phases to mentoring which were categorized as career and psychological. The multistep thematic data analysis conducted through the method of two step coding revealed that participants who had a mentor indicated that their mentor did have a positive impact on them. Participants indicated that mentor disclosure played a commendable role in their self-confidence. Research previously conducted has analyzed the role of disclosure, but in many cases, it was in regard to mentee disclosure and how the mentee decided their mentorship relationships through the level of self-disclosure they had with their mentor (Blickle, Schneider, Perrewe, Blass, & Ferris, 2008). This study confirms and supports that self-disclosure plays a key role in defining mentoring relationships, but also sheds light on the importance of mentor disclosure of past struggles and trials. Future studies could research a comparison between mentor styles that self-disclose and those that do not. This study can impact directly impact tools and tactics used by mentors through the implication of self-disclosure. The implementation provides and fosters a comfortable setting for mentees to fail and continue to grow.

Limitations and Future Direction

A limitation of this study was the skewed ratio between male and female participants, with majority being female. Through the multitude of studies that have researched IP in women, including Clance's foundational IP study, future research should strive to incorporate more men and nonbinary individuals in their studies. Another limitation was differing definitions and expectations of mentoring and a personal mentor. Through having different experiences with how participants came to have a mentor, mentees had varying levels of expectations for their mentor to fulfill. In the future, studies should define mentoring to streamline expectations of the mentor/mentee relationship.

Conclusion

This study examined the positive impact a mentor often has on successes of a mentee. From the three open-ended survey questions, several themes emerged: not deserving of accomplishments or successes, attribute success to other skills, hidden disaster who does not belong, positive impact on mentee, mentoring serving as a guide, mentor disclosure, and encouragement and support provided by the mentor. This study revealed that mentoring is viewed to have a positive impact on the success of mentees through encouraging challenge and building confidence. This study also indicates that mentor disclosure is a powerful tool that humanizes mistakes and normalizes failure as an inevitable opportunity to learn and grow from.

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