Case: Good Intentions Gone Wrong

Key Phrases:

- Relying on one mentor is not enough
- Advising, supervising, and mentoring
- Developmental and technical mentoring
- Effective mentoring contracts and regular re-assessments

Chris' Perspective:

Chris was very excited about his new junior faculty position. Helen, the division chief, seemed very supportive of his research interests, although they were very different from her own. They met several times early on, and she was able to give him concrete suggestions on research strategies. However, soon after starting, Helen told Chris that she was too busy to be his overall research adviser/mentor and that Jonathan, another faculty member in the division, would serve in this role.

Chris started meeting with Jonathan and found he was a good listener and very empathetic, often sharing his own experiences and challenges along the way. Soon after, an opportunity arose for Chris to develop a research project in his area of interest, collaborating with someone outside of the division. Jonathan encouraged him, and offered to continue as Chris' research mentor within the division even though the topic and methods were outside of his area of focus.

As time progressed, Chris encountered several challenges in developing and executing his project due to significant limitations in his dataset and his lack of experience with statistical programming. On Jonathan's advice, Chris found a statistician willing to meet with him occasionally and give him general advice. While this helped, Chris still felt uncomfortable with the methodology and frustrated with the slow pace of the project. As Jonathan was not really helping him overcome these challenges, Chris scheduled meetings less frequently. It seemed to Chris that other new faculty in the division had much more structure and support in terms of a network of advisors, but Chris didn't know how to create this with his project well underway and based largely outside of the division.

At the end of his first year, Chris and Jonathan were required by the division to fill out an assessment of Chris' research progress to date. Each of them described the perceived project challenges but neither addressed directly the character of their mentoring relationship. Chris

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regretted not asking Helen to stay on as a secondary mentor, both for his developmental growth and technical support. Although he was making progress, overall Chris felt he had not advanced as much as he could have.

Jonathan's Perspective:

Jonathan was a mid-level faculty member up for promotion to associate professor when Helen approached him to be Chris' mentor. In general, Jonathan's career was going well – he had adequate funding for his research and a good network of mentors and collaborators around him, and he had successfully mentored another new faculty member in Jonathan's research area to success in publication and funding.

Jonathan loved talking to fellows and junior faculty about their work and their lives in general, sharing his own experiences and giving them advice. However, Jonathan found it hard to help Chris overcome his project challenges and to give him general career advice, especially since Jonathan was not very familiar with Chris' research topic or the methods he was using for this project. He found it much harder to mentor Chris than his prior mentee, who had been working in Jonathan's area of interest, had a stronger mentoring network within the program, and had not required much structured oversight. Jonathan noticed over time that Chris was meeting with him less frequently, but he knew that Chris had a collaborator outside of the division and he felt that Chris would contact him to set up a meeting if he needed more support. At the end of the year, Jonathan wondered if he could have served Chris better as a mentor.

Case Questions:
1. What went wrong in the management of the mentor/mentee relationship?
2. Whose responsibility is it to maximize the success of the mentor/mentee relationship?
3. What might Chris and Jonathan have done differently in establishing and assessing the effectiveness of their relationship?
4. What might Helen, as a division chief, do differently to help oversee and increase the likelihood of establishing successful mentor/mentee relationships?