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The Power of Mentorship: Why Seasoned CSTs Must Step Up

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The path we choose in life is often created by moments that leave a footprint on our hearts. For me, the journey toward becoming a surgical technologist began at the age of 16, in a hospital room filled with anxiety and hope. My grandmother was about to undergo open heart surgery. The surgeon came in explaining the procedure with both clarity and compassion, but to my 16-year-old brain, I was hooked! In that tense moment, something in me awakened, and I was overcome by a curiosity about the world of surgery and the people who make healing possible.

Title: The Power of Mentorship: Why Seasoned CSTs Must Step Up

The journey from surgical technology student to Certified Surgical Technologist (CST®) is

one marked by growth, grit, and a thousand unspoken lessons learned along the sterile path. Those of us who have been in the trenches for a decade or more know that no textbook or skills lab can fully prepare someone for the realities of

the operating room. That's why mentorship isn't a luxury or a bonus in our field—it's a responsibility.

After 23 years in the profession and now serving as a senior program director and a board member of the California State Assembly of Surgical Technologists, I can say with confidence: seasoned CSTs are the gatekeepers of our profession's integrity, wisdom, and future. Our collective experience holds value not just for the next case, but for the next generation.

Why Mentorship Matters

Surgical technologists are often trained in a sink-or-swim environment. While this builds resilience, it can also lead to anxiety, burnout, and a feeling of isolation among new techs. A seasoned CST who steps in to provide guidance can change the entire trajectory of a newcomer's experience.

Mentorship provides:

- **Emotional support** during stressful cases or difficult learning curves
- **Real-world context** for clinical skills and classroom learning
- **Accountability** for professionalism, punctuality, and sterile discipline
- **Career direction** through shared stories, goals, and exposure to growth paths

Mentorship is not just helpful—it's transformational.

Breaking Down the Barriers to Mentorship

One of the most common refrains I hear from veteran CSTs is, "I don't have time," or "I'm not a teacher." The truth is, mentorship doesn't have to be formal or time-consuming. It starts with presence, patience, and a willingness to model the standard.

Some CSTs worry about stepping on toes or not being "qualified" to mentor. But mentorship is not about perfection—it's about intention. You don't need to know everything. You just need to care.

Actionable Ways CSTs Can Mentor the Next Generation

1. **Model excellence every day**
Students and new techs are always watching. The way you prep your back table, handle conflict, or speak up in a timeout becomes part of their professional blueprint.
2. **Speak life into their potential**
A simple "you did well in there" or "I saw how you caught that count error—good job" can shift someone's mindset for the better. Affirmations from a respected CST are powerful.
3. **Invite them into learning moments**
When the case is over, take a moment to debrief. Ask, "What did you notice? What would you do differently next time?" Create a space for reflection and growth.
4. **Demystify the profession**
Talk to them about certifications, career paths, union options, specialties, and the realities of being on call. This insight can help them plan and stay invested long term.
5. **Advocate for their success**
If you see someone with potential, speak their name in rooms of opportunity. Recommend them for jobs, additional training, or recognition. Sometimes, one advocate can change everything.
6. **Create a no-judgment zone**
New CSTs will make mistakes. So did you. Be the person they can come to for honest feedback without shame. A culture of safety starts with psychological safety.

What's In It for You?

Mentorship doesn't just benefit the mentee. It:

- Reinforces your own knowledge and accountability
- Deepens your sense of purpose and pride
- Leaves a lasting legacy in the field
- Builds stronger teams and smoother workflows

Mentorship is also one of the clearest pathways to leadership. It sharpens your communication, empathy, and instructional skills — key traits for those looking to move into education, management, or advocacy roles.

Changing the Culture, One Tech at a Time

Our profession is at a crossroads. As more CST®s retire or shift into other roles, the demand for skilled, confident, and professional technologists is only growing. We cannot afford to let new techs sink without support.

Mentorship has the power to:

- Reduce burnout and turnover
- Improve patient outcomes through better team synergy
- Cultivate a more inclusive and supportive culture
- Elevate the image and recognition of CSTs across healthcare

A Final Word: You Were Once Them

Think back to your first week in the O.R. The nerves. The adrenaline. The fear of breaking sterility. The hope that someone — anyone — might offer a tip or a kind word.

Be that person now.

If you have even a few years under your belt, you have wisdom worth sharing. If you've weathered the long shifts, the tough surgeons, the intense emergencies, and still show up with pride — you are exactly what the future of surgical technology needs.

Let us not hoard our knowledge. Let us pass it on, deliberately, compassionately, and often. Because when we mentor, we don't just shape careers. We shape the profession.



About the Author

Kendria Stevens-Hulsinger, CST, is a seasoned Certified Surgical Technologist with over 23 years of experience in the operating room and surgical education. She currently serves as Senior Program Director at Pima Medical Institute, where she oversees five surgical technology and four sterile processing programs. In addition, she is a board member of the California State Assembly of Surgical Technologists. Kendria is a passionate advocate for mentorship, professional development, and advancing the next generation of CSTs. Her leadership is rooted in fostering excellence and cultivating a culture of support, with a commitment to leaving a lasting impact on the surgical technology profession.

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