

C H A P T E R

Let's Talk: Face-to-Face and E-Conversations

WE'VE TALKED ABOUT HOW MENTORING can be used to boost performance or help individuals advance in their careers, or make it possible for new hires with lots of ability to hit the ground running, thanks to your support. But mentoring can also be used to address problems experienced by these same mentees.

Successful Mentoring

Admittedly, solving a mentee's problem can take up a lot of your time as a mentor. But it comes with the responsibility, and, if done well, it can strengthen the mentor/mentee relationship.

The secret to successful mentoring is to listen not only to the words being said by your mentee about a workday but also the feelings that underlie those words. Sometimes the mentee has a concern, or is uncertain about how you might be able to help, and therefore doesn't say anything specific about the situation. There are also times when your mentee may have a difficulty but may be embarrassed to bring it up because it concerns a problem with his or her supervisor or a colleague or family member. Let's look at how to address these kinds of situations.

Operating Matters

Jay had joined his company's mentoring program. The program's coordinating committee is responsible for pairing mentors and mentees, and Jay was fortunate to get Patrick, the warehouse's shipping manager. The

company had its eyes on Patrick, so it also had its eyes on Jay as Patrick's mentor.

Jay had set up a meeting for lunch, and he was a little annoyed when Patrick didn't come on time. Patrick was a half hour late, and Jay began to worry about what might have happened. Suddenly, Jay saw Patrick dashing through the cafeteria line, grabbing at food. As soon as Patrick saw Jay, he headed for his table, nearly knocking a tray out of the hands of a staff member on the way. "I'm sorry I'm so late," he told Jay as he caught his breath. "It's been a busy day. First, one thing went wrong and then another. But the real reason behind my lateness for lunch was a delay in getting a shipment out. It's really annoying—we keep losing track of finished parts in the warehouse."

"Should I become involved in this issue?" Jay wondered. On one hand, it wasn't Jay's area of expertise—Jay was head of product engineering at the plant. Patrick, as shipping head, should be addressing the situation, Jay thought. On the other hand, he reasoned, if the situation is a recurring one—and Patrick had indicated that it was—then its continuation would reflect poorly on both Jay and Patrick. So Jay decided to find out more about the matter. At the very least, he thought, he could teach Patrick about how to handle work problems when he experienced them. "How often does the problem occur?"

Patrick, reaching for the menu, replied: "Too often. I just wish I knew what was happening."

"This could suggest that a parts management problem exists, right?" Then Jay paused in order to let his remark set in. He wanted to give Patrick the opportunity to think about what had happened today, a few days ago, and the previous week—incidents he knew about because Patrick had told him about them at earlier sessions. Jay thought that there was a pattern here, but he knew that Patrick wouldn't learn to recognize problems like these if he told him. Patrick had to learn to identify patterns for himself.

"You know, Jay, I think you may be right. I've been so busy finishing my operating plans and budget lately, I never realized that the warehouse might need a better way to keep track of raw and finished parts."

Jay now had two options. He could let the matter drop and move on to the purpose of the meeting—Patrick's progress on his operating plan and budget. Or Jay could probe further about the shipping problem, inquiring how (or if) Patrick planned to investigate the situation further. Since the installation of such a system would need to be included in the

next year's plan, it wouldn't be odd to inquire further about it, after all. Surprisingly, Patrick decided to drop the issue.

"Gee, Jay, I have no idea what to do. I'll pass the problem on to the plant manager at our next meeting. Now, let's talk about this operating plan . . ."

Jay decided to help Patrick, not only about his operating problem but also about his attitude toward the problems he encountered. "Patrick, before we do that, what do you plan to say to the head of the plant? As the head of shipping, don't you think you have some responsibility to identify the problem?"

"I do, but you know how experienced Steve, our plant manager, is at resolving problems. He'll know what to do."

"But he'd be more impressed with you if you presented him with the facts, if not a solution, at your meeting, right?" said Jay.

Patrick thoughtfully responded, "Yes, you're right. So, how do I begin?"

Jay realized that Patrick was still trying to pass the problem on to someone else—this time, it was him. Jay's goal as Patrick's mentor was to develop his professional abilities, not to be a crutch for him. So, rather than answer Patrick's question, he asked him one: "Jay, if you were in Steve's place, what would you want to know about the problem?"

"I guess he would want to know when the problem occurs and what might be behind the situation. If I think that a new system needs to be installed, he'd ask me what it might cost.

Jay, happier, said, "Yes, you're right." Again, Jay paused, passing the decision about the next step that needed to be taken back to Patrick.

"Wait a minute. I was on a project team and we used several sophisticated problem-solving tools to identify the reason behind a shortfall in sales. Do you think I could use some of those tools to help here?" Patrick asked.

With a smile on his face, Jay responded, "It sounds like they might be valuable."

Caught up in the idea, Patrick mentioned the techniques he had learned to use: Pareto analysis, scatter diagrams, workflow diagrams, cause-and-effect diagrams, and variance analysis. "Look. I'm not as knowledgeable about these techniques as I should be. I had better go to the project leader of that team to see if she can lend me a hand. Can we reschedule lunch for another day?"

"Sure," answered Jay.

As Patrick's mentor, Jay had done his work well. He had helped

Patrick see a problem in the making, helped him begin to think about solving the problem, and even taught him how to use the colleagues with whom he had worked in the past to help him with the current situation. As Patrick walked away, it suddenly occurred to Jay that there was something that Patrick could do for him. “Hey, wait a minute. Let me come along. I’m not familiar with all those techniques, and this might be a learning opportunity *for me.*”

This conversation between Jay and Patrick is instructive in two ways. First, it shows how mentors should *not* solve mentee problems. Rather, they should use questions and statements to help their mentees think them through and come to reasonable solutions. Only if the answer is wrong should the mentor intervene. Second, as you no doubt noticed, this story demonstrates how helping a mentee with a situation can be a learning experience for you as a mentor.

The First Steps in a Mentoring Relationship

Jay was fortunate in that he had a protégé who fell into the category of high potential; that is, he was an individual who, with minimal coaching, had the ability to move up. As a mentor, when you are paired with a protégé you don’t know well, even before you discuss the person’s goals you must be clear about his or her skills, abilities, and knowledge, as well as career objectives. If your mentee is like most people, he or she may want to advance but may not be sure what that means in real terms. In other words, what would the individual like to be doing in the next two years, maybe five years, ten years from now? How prepared is the person for the first big career move?

So these are the first questions that you, as a mentor, need to address with a new protégé. At the very least, you should ask your mentee to make a prioritized list of ways you can help him or her move to the next level. Sometimes, you may be surprised to discover that a talented and conscientious mentee, with all the skills he or she needs for advancement, may lack self-confidence.

Opening Up Possibilities That May Not Have Been Imagined

There are countless kinds of fears that people have, and many of them show up at work. While you won’t find your mentee running and hiding under his or her desk, you might find other signs, like depression or anger, when you talk about career advancement. For example, Cindy, an

accountant at a small accounting firm, was irritated because she thought that the only way that she would advance in her career would be to put in overtime every night and also work weekends. A single mom with two daughters, Cindy felt that such a commitment was out of the question for some time to come.

Phoebe, Cindy's mentor, worked in a publishing company's financial department. She felt that she had the responsibility to make Cindy aware of her capabilities and also to encourage her to take the risk that comes with making an effort to gain the attention of those who make hiring decisions, like those in Phoebe's company. Phoebe knew that the head of her department was looking for an assistant director, which was a logical career move for Cindy. All Cindy needed to do was to update her resume. Phoebe knew the department head would like Cindy's background and conscientiousness. But Phoebe also knew that Cindy needed a makeover to make it past the HR department.

Phoebe first had to talk Cindy out of the belief that she had to leave her daughters in the hands of a sitter every evening and put her nose to the grindstone to take an advancement. As far as the job was concerned, Phoebe felt that all Cindy needed was to project a more professional image that would get people to know and recognize her potential. What would this entail? Phoebe's first step as a mentor was to encourage Cindy to discard that outmoded image of herself, as well as to discard any outmoded habits.

For instance, Cindy, a young mother, seemed to carry all the trappings of motherhood with her—from clothes that wouldn't spoil from milk spills to stuffed toys, coloring books, and crayons in an oversized bag. Even more important, Phoebe had to overcome Cindy's reluctance to imagine a better position than the one she currently had—to visualize herself ultimately as the assistant director of finance for the publishing firm. Cindy had to think of herself as receiving the position and diving successfully into the new job and all she could learn in the job.

Phoebe: Cindy, you know that there is going to be an opening as assistant director in my company. Would that be a goal of interest to you?

Cindy: I don't know, Phoebe. I've got Jennifer and Jessica to care for. I don't know if I would have the time.

Phoebe: You once told me that you enjoyed many of the administrative tasks that you have in your job. About 50 percent of this job is administrative.

Cindy: Really. And I'd be working with more people in more complex situations.

Phoebe: Well . . .

Cindy: I don't know [pausing]. Oh, nobody would take me seriously as a candidate for the position.

Phoebe: First, Cindy, you have to take yourself seriously as a candidate for the position. If you did, then we could work to make others do the same.

Cindy [enthusiastic]: Do you really think I could get the position?

Phoebe: I can't promise anything, but you won't go anywhere in your career if you don't give it a try. How about it?

Phoebe was able to get Cindy to think about her aspirations by urging her to think about those things she really enjoyed doing—that is, what tasks truly made her happy. To trigger such thinking, as a mentor you might want to ask your mentee to recall one or two moments in the near past that were especially satisfying. When you meet with your mentee, you would talk about these. As you question your mentee, you would get insights into your mentee's thinking about the next rung on the career ladder, as Phoebe had.

Encouraging a Realistic View of Advancement Potential

Your goal as a career counselor is to determine not only what rung your mentee believes that he or she is qualified to reach but also what specific rung is in your mentee's mind. If you work in the same organization as your mentee, you are best qualified to judge how realistic the mentee's goal is. If you are not colleagues, but you are familiar with your mentee's company and/or industry, then you may be able to assess how realistic your mentee's plan for advancement is. Is the organization growing so there is room for your mentee to rise in the organization or is the company currently held back by the economy or state of the industry?

If you are mentoring a colleague, you may not want to discourage him or her if you see no opportunity for promotion at this time. On the other hand, you need to be honest with your mentee. If now is not the time to shoot for that ideal position he or she wants, you may suggest that your mentee seek a promotion that would position him or her for consideration at a later time. Some mentees are reluctant to consider an alternative to their ideal job, but zigzagging within the ranks is an option

that should not be ignored, particularly in tough economic times when companies are running lean with little opportunity for promotion.

Sometimes, it will help if you send the mentee out to do research about available positions and the requirements. For example, Linda wanted to move up to assistant marketing manager yet she lacked some critical skills for the position. Her mentor, Tom, knew that, and realized that Linda needed to make a commitment to some on-the-job training, maybe even a semester at a community college, to qualify for the position. He suggested her need for training, but she was resistant. Rather than fight over the matter, he suggested she have a heart-to-heart talk with both the head of marketing and the human resources manager to get a clear idea of the qualifications for the position.

Linda came back with a much more realistic view. While she still was enthusiastic about her career goal, she realized it would take longer—and some extra training—and accepted her mentor's advice.

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Phoebe and Tom both worked with their respective mentees to write vision statements that identified their mentees' specific job goals and also the action steps that would need to be taken to achieve the objective. Remember how in corporate planning we develop SMART objectives—that is, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely (scheduled) goals? Likewise, the development goals that you and your mentee should set should be SMART.

The Mentor's Tough Talks

In the previous chapter, I took you through a couple of coaching sessions. Sometimes, such sessions aren't as simple as the ones described in textbooks. When you are mentoring and the results aren't as they should be, constructive feedback isn't enough. The advice you offer may be rejected. Clearly, the problem with giving criticism—even something we call “constructive feedback”—is that some people just don't take kindly to it. Criticism is evaluative and judgmental, no matter how much you might try to sugarcoat it.

Most people feel threatened by criticism. For some, it can even prolong the problem. What should you do? To avoid giving the criticism would mean accepting the defeating behavior, so that is not the right response. When a mentee's behavior isn't up to snuff, you need to address it. Remember, your goal is to bring around change rather than continually criticize what the mentee is doing. Giving the same criticism

over and over when a mentee makes a mistake repeatedly will accomplish nothing.

The most effective way to handle a problem or a disagreement between a mentor and mentee is to look at what happened and try to analyze the source. In most instances, you will discover that you will need to switch from coaching to counseling mode. This means that you and your mentee need to do two things:

1. Win the mentee's agreement that there is a need for a change.
2. Agree on the specific actions that your mentee will take to correct the mistake or behavior problem.

If you were your mentee's supervisor, you would be able to use the threat of termination if there is no change in behavior. But as the individual's mentor, you have to rely more on the trust between you, the respect the mentee has for your past experience, and your ability to influence his or her thinking. This last point is critical. Influencing isn't about manipulation or the misuse of power. It is about using your good relationship with your mentee, and the trust he or she has in your know-how, to change the individual's attitude about the situation. Present your ideas logically and persuasively, spelling out clearly and honestly how your mentee is going to personally benefit from doing as you suggest.

Begin by clarifying in your own mind what your objective is. What do you want to achieve? The second step is to actually plan your campaign. Ask yourself how you will discuss the situation with your mentee in a manner that is most likely to gain his or her agreement. For instance, when you next meet with your mentee, perhaps you should listen before you say anything. Ask open-ended questions (e.g., How? Why? What? When? and Where?) to discover any concerns that may be behind his or her past refusal to accept your suggestions.

You also have to be prepared to answer any questions you are asked by your mentee.

Finally, and most importantly, you need to spell out the benefits if your mentee shifts gears and behaves as you suggest. Use open and friendly body language (e.g., maintain eye contact, keep arms in a relaxed position) to communicate, nonverbally, your good intentions.

Your mentee may be refusing to accept your opinion because he or she feels threatened, is frightened of making a mistake, or believes you are overselling your concern about the impact that continuation of such behavior will have on the individual's career plans. Of course, it could

also be that your mentee doesn't really understand what you are suggesting. What should you do? Rather than tell you, let me show you how Michael handled such a situation with his mentee, Gene.

MICHAEL: CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Gene refused to accept Michael's remark that he needed to change his leadership style. As head of the new product development team, Gene interrupted members, refused to consider others' ideas, and demanded members make unrealistic deadlines. Even if the team was successful with the idea that Gene was pushing down the throats of his teammates, Michael felt that senior management would not be pleased. It knew that Gene wasn't a team player, a value highly prized at their organization.

When Gene joined Michael for lunch, Michael began the meeting by telling Gene, "Gene, there's something that's concerning me and I need to talk to you about it." Having heard Michael raise the issue of his behavior in the new product development team, Gene told him, "Let's not go over that again, Mike. Management respects strong leaders."

"Yes, management respects strong leaders, but," he continued, "it is looking for leaders who listen to their followers and gain their support, not those who badger and harass those with whom they work." Michael then went on to describe the management styles of several recently promoted managers. Each had gained senior management's attention by their leadership skills, yes, but these skills included a willingness to listen to their staff members, an openness to others' ideas, and creation of a strong team. "Would you agree, Gene, that these are qualities that separate these managers from others?" Michael asked his mentee.

"Yes," Gene said, "but that's not me. I'm not sure I could handle that style effectively."

As far as Michael was concerned, this admission from Gene was a critical turning point in the discussion with his mentee, "I'll help you," he offered. Michael and Gene then sat down and worked out an action plan that would help build the leadership skills that their organization expected in its leaders. The development plan that they completed included specific steps that Gene should take to open up the discussion in the product development team and make the final product recommendation a product of everyone's ideas. Michael had sat through several sessions in the past as a guest of the team, and he promised to sit

through several more to observe Gene's change in behavior and offer constructive feedback after the fact.

Since Gene lacked self-confidence about his ability to change his style, Michael suggested that he try to re-visualize his behavior. "Think about how you would act and what you would say," he suggested. Michael knew that the picture Gene would create in his mind would help create a real-life change in his behavior. This didn't mean that the problem was done and solved. It took several more meetings before Gene had fully bought the idea of changing his leadership style. But Gene did stop fighting with Michael and moved to accepting his viewpoint and even asking for feedback on his behavior. Michael invited questions and answered them patiently and thoroughly. He knew that Gene had to make a big style adjustment.

Michael was successful because he followed a four-step process:

1. He made sure that Gene heard the message. As a mentor, you have to overcome mentee objections that can range from having a different agenda from yours to disbelief that your idea is not in their best interests, to an unspoken fear that giving up one behavioral style for another could lose them control of a situation critical to their advancement.

2. He worked to be clear. As a mentor, you need to be sure that you are clear to your mentee about what change in behavior you expect—and why.

3. He realized that the process was useless unless Gene was agreeable. This is your goal as a mentor. Just as in counseling an employee, you can't expect a change in behavior until your mentee acknowledges that a continuation of the current behavior can impede career advancement. It's your responsibility as the mentor to communicate the cost to your mentee in a manner that isn't threatening but convinces him or her to change behavior.

4. Michael sat down with Gene and agreed on changes to the vision statement and action plan. When there is a glitch in achieving a career goal, the development plan needs to be revised to address the problem. Thereafter, you and your protégé need to make sure you keep track of your mentee's progress. Be patient—your mentee may not change overnight. What you want to see is effort in the new direction you have both set.

What if your mentee *announces* to you that he or she has had a confrontation with a peer or, worse, a manager above him or her and plans to let the individual know how he or she feels. A trick that many communication specialists suggest is an “I message confrontation.” Yes, your protégé wants to tell the boss off. What should you say? An “I message” generally contains three parts:

1. A neutral description of what you perceive the mentee intends to do.
2. A statement of the possible negative effects on the mentee or other people.
3. The feelings or emotions you are having about the mentee’s plan.

Note that nowhere have you told the mentee how to behave. The mentee still makes the final decision. However, your mentee knows the following from your “I statements.”

1. “I believe that you are so angry at your boss that you will march into her office and lose your temper as you tell her off.”
2. “I believe others will observe your behavior and consider you unprofessional for losing your temper, no matter how justified.”
3. “As your mentor, I am concerned about how such an act will impact your reputation as someone who is cool, calm, and capable of addressing numerous problem situations.”

Can you see how these three statements might discourage your mentee from pursuing her original intent?

E-Mentoring

Office technology has created opportunities to mentor individuals off-site. Mentors and mentees can communicate via e-mail, supplementing their face-to-face meetings. Where mentors and mentees are located in different states, even different countries, e-mail, phone calls, and teleconferencing may even replace face-to-face meetings. Software can set up discussion boards where mentors and protégés can have ongoing dialogues. And let’s not forget cell phones for emergency calls for advice.

E-mentoring is on an increase, as is mentoring itself. After all, in today's busy world, a virtual mentoring program provides for greater flexibility in regards to time—on a practical side, when two people are separated by multiple time zones, the number of hours they may be available to each other decreases—it allows individuals from very different parts of the country to partner, which can make the experience broadening for both.

At the same time, there are drawbacks to virtual mentoring. The experience can lack the spontaneity of interpersonal communication that usually develops in face-to-face mentoring. This shouldn't discourage prospective mentors from considering this mode of mentorship, however. Those who have engaged in virtual mentoring programs report that their experience was a fun challenge. They felt they had grown themselves, since the process put a little greater demand on their communication—in particular, e-mail skills.

There are four key steps in most mentoring relationships, and they are as applicable in distance mentoring as in traditional mentor relationships:

- *Building the Relationship.* If possible, both the mentor and protégé should meet in person to share their objectives from the relationship prior to the start of the e-mentor relationship.
- *Setting Clear Expectations.* The mentor has to ask the protégé if he or she has specific concerns or career goals. The mentor, in turn, needs to describe how he or she hopes to assist the mentee. At the same time, the mentor needs to be clear about his or her commitment to the protégé. Some protégés assume that their mentors will be more accessible since they are both communicating via e-mail, but that may actually not be the case.
- *Monitoring the Results.* Some mentors and protégés communicate exclusively via e-mail, others limit e-mail communications to the posting of non-time-urgent questions to the mentor, requests for meetings with the other party, and summaries of conclusions drawn from the last communication. All other communications are handled via phone.

Those who run phone meetings kick off these phone sessions with a review of the protégé's last assignment or outcome of the planned activity discussed during the last phone call. What did the protégé accomplish? Is there something new that the protégé tried that was successful? What challenges did the protégé overcome and what challenges does he

still feel need to be met? What did the mentee learn about not only how to handle a new responsibility but also him- or herself?

The mentor and protégé should also review any unexpected situations that arose since the last phone call. What were they? What impact have they had on the opportunities or challenges facing the protégé in the near future? How can the mentor help? Finally, the two should discuss those activities the protégé will be doing until the next phone call. The protégé should be prepared to identify the next learning opportunity, and together the mentoring partners should decide on an appropriate assignment as a learning experience. Before the two hang up, they should agree on a date when the two will talk again—and the protégé will offer an update on the assignment.

- *Providing Feedback.* Since distance management doesn't give a mentor the same interaction with a protégé as face-to-face communications, the mentor has to rely on the remote control that comes from respect for the mentor. The mentor can begin to foster that trust by showing trust him- or herself in the protégé. That means that the mentor only questions the protégé when there is real reason to do so about the results of an assignment.

Should you mentor someone on the phone, it's important that you listen not only to what is said but also what is not said, like the silence after a question is asked. Likewise, consider what the protégé isn't saying. Sometimes that can tell you more than what the mentee does say. Keep your ear tuned for a rising or lowering of voice, a change in tone, and a quickening or slowing of speaking pace as well.

In face-to-face communications, you can rely on body language for additional insight into how the coaching session is going. In phone communications, you will need to tell your protégé what you are "hearing" or "sensing." Check on feelings by asking your protégé how he feels about a remark you make. Also, push for specifics—don't settle for generalities. Ask that your protégé express thoughts and opinions clearly. After all, you have to understand where your protégé is coming from to make the mentoring relationship worthwhile for him or her and make the most effective use of your time. Certainly, don't hang up before you have both summarized in words of your own what you feel has been agreed to, testing the accuracy of your perceptions.

What about e-mail? Just as with the phone, you should be focused on the communications under way. Don't let co-workers distract you from the flow of the communication. Certainly, in providing construc-

tive feedback, think first before you press the “Send” button with your message.

Also, you may be tempted to respond immediately to a message, either via an e-mail or on an instant messaging system. Don't. Avoid knee-jerk responses. Electronic communication is quick—that's why we use it. But its greatest benefit can also be its greatest drawback. When you sit down at the keyboard to respond to your e-mail, your mindset is typically to get through it all—to empty your mailbox and free yourself for other tasks. That mindset can generate snap judgments. It's unwise to allow this to happen with any e-mail, but it is particularly wrong if you allow it to happen to some mentee who is asking for opinion or advice. So be mindful of speed when you are answering e-mail from your mentee—a quickly worded response to a critical question can destroy the considerable time you have taken with your distance mentee to build a positive relationship.

The Knack for E-Mentoring

No question, e-mentoring takes a certain ability. One manager I know told me about a problem that arose. Anna, who was located at headquarters, was mentoring Travis, a newbie at a regional office. Anna had offered some advice to Travis about his handling of his first focus group. To her surprise, the next e-mail she received flamed with CAPITAL LETTERS indicating his annoyance with her remarks and—worse—criticism of Anna as a mentor. Anna told me how she was just dying to press the “Caps Lock” key as she began her reply, but she resisted because she knew that doing so would only escalate the e-argument.

She took her hands off the keyboard and went for a walk. She left Travis's emotionally charged message in her e-mail for a full day before she felt calm enough to respond to his message. “I had to remember that there really was a live person on the receiving end of any message that I wrote,” she told me. “He was young and he was upset that the focus panel didn't go as well as he had expected. I hadn't told him what he did wrong. I only asked him to think about how he might better handle certain aspects of the process, but I guess ‘the list’ ticked him off.”

Anna continued, “The message clearly was misunderstood, too. I wasn't telling him that he had done a poor job. Rather, I was telling him that he did well for his first effort. And I was listing some points that he might want to consider the next time. But Travis saw the entire e-mail as

critical of his effort.” She continued, “Fortunately, I realized that by flaming back, I would only keep the communication gaffe alive. I’ve been the recipient of unintended hurt feelings, so I could appreciate how Travis might be feeling.”

After considerable thought, Anna replied by e-mail. Her response began with acknowledgment about Travis’s need to flame. (Even though it was unjust, acknowledgment of Travis’s feelings under the circumstances seemed fair.) She then went on to explain her intent in sending the list of suggestions. People are usually reasonable if they feel they have been treated sincerely and honestly—which is how Travis responded to Anna’s reply.

Tone, Rhythm, Persuasion

Anna’s reply exhibited a much friendlier tone than her earlier message. As a recipient of Anna’s e-mail, I know that they can be a little officious, so I believe that she made an extra effort to duplicate a conversational style in her e-mail without erring on the side of being too informal and conversational. She used words and phrases that came naturally. She also kept her message short and to the point. “The most important point that I wanted to make in my reply,” Anna told me, “was that Travis had my support.”

What if the e-mail reply hadn’t worked? Then Anna would have suggested a phone call to discuss the matter further. The sooner they resolved the disagreement, the better. Its continuation would simply have impeded the mentee’s development. And that’s something that a mentor never should do.