

# CHAPTER

# 12

## Mentoring Traps to Avoid

NOT ALL MENTORING EFFORTS work out as planned. Like all human relationships, they have their ups and their downs. Fortunately, some of the downs, or traps, can be prevented. Just as forewarned is forearmed in coaching and counseling, so too it is with mentoring. You can maximize the benefits of mentoring top talent and avoid potential problems by being aware of the problems that can arise in mentoring. Formal mentoring programs even go so far as to acknowledge this possibility. Often, such programs include, as a part of an agreement between mentor and protégé, an “out clause” that allows either party to put an end to the relationship without any needed explanation.

### **Breaking Up: When It’s Time for the Mentee to Move On**

Interestingly, one major mentoring trap is the belief of the mentor that he or she can’t end the relationship—that only the mentee can do that. Not so. There are several reasons a mentor might want to end the mentoring relationship, including the possibility that the top performer has outgrown the mentor. Yes, it is possible for you to mentor a talented employee to the point where he or she needs challenges that you can’t offer. Then you may want to recommend that the top employee find another mentor—maybe a manager with a growing department in which opportunities for promotion for your talented mentee might arise.

It might seem that you are making an unnecessary sacrifice, but consider the reality. If your mentee is as bright and as hardworking as you believe, he or she probably feels a little restless. The mentee may be thinking of career opportunities outside your organization. Better to

keep the individual with your organization. And while you may lose an outstanding employee, you could find that department productivity and morale increase as staff members see what your efforts on their co-worker's behalf have brought.

Needless to say, it is easier to end mentoring relationships built on a few brief meetings than it is to write *finis* to a long-term relationship with an exceptional staff member with whom you have probably built good rapport. In a short relationship, you can continue to show interest but also look for opportunities for that person to meet with and seek answers from others in the organization. In time, you will find that the employee comes to you for help less frequently.

In any event, it is best to explain your decision to end the mentorship with your top performer, regardless of how formal or informal the relationship was. The employee needs to know why you feel you can no longer continue to contribute to his or her career advancement. That you're too busy only sends a message to the mentee that he or she is not as important as you initially made the individual believe. It will only demotivate the mentee and lower his or her level of performance, whereas you entered into the mentoring arrangement to further increase this talented employee's contribution to the department or company as a whole. Instead, point out those developmental gaps that the employee still has and the skills that a new mentor must have to help close them—areas in which you are not expert. Then, together with your staff member, develop a list of prospective new mentors that have these strengths.

If a mentee has the talents that attracted you in the first place, it should be possible for you to find another mentor for the person or for the mentee to locate one for him- or herself. Even though you end the mentorship with a staff member or other mentee, you should make clear to the employee that your door is always open for those times that the employee needs help—the same as it is open for any other employee.

### **When Mentoring Hurts Rather Than Helps**

What kinds of mentorship problems should cause you to dissolve the relationship? Some mentors have found that mentoring their subordinates can inhibit their employees' development rather than support it. The talented employee becomes so dependent on his or her managerial mentor that there is actually a decline in performance. This is particularly a problem in mentoring relationships between a mentor and his or her subordinate. For example, rather than trying to resolve problems on his

or her own, the mentee continually runs to the mentor for help. But, worse, rather than begin to build his or her own network of contacts, this talented employee becomes dependent on the mentor to use his or her network of contacts both within and outside the organization. The employee will be giving so much attention to the mentorship that he or she won't be developing connections with others who are important to success, and perhaps even focus more on the mentorship than on routine work.

Evidence of this is cause to end the mentoring relationship, regardless of its nature. Overdependence on a mentor is a major trap, and the only way it can be addressed is by severing the relationship as soon as there is proof of its existence. After all, the purpose of mentoring a top talent is to increase individual or organization effectiveness. Your mentee can become complacent unless you take action—which is to take that little chick you put under your wing and kick him or her out of the nest.

Another trap that mentors can fall into is to become so concerned with their protégés' careers that they lose perspective about their role. Alex almost did this when Jenny, his protégé, told him about her marital problems.

#### ALEX: AVOIDING JENNY'S MARRIAGE PITFALLS

Jenny probably would not have brought up the situation regarding her marriage except that Alex had mentioned her disinterest in her work over the previous few weeks. When he asked why, Jenny told him that she had found out that her husband was having an affair with a woman in the office. When Alex heard the story, he told me how he had been tempted to offer Jenny advice based on his relationship with his stay-at-home wife. "Fortunately, I didn't, however," he said. "That isn't the advice and counsel I promised to give Jenny when I agreed to mentor her. Nor does my home situation or my wife's life goals compare to those of Jenny."

Alex felt that the only help that he could offer was to suggest that she seek a family counselor. He then went on to discuss with Jenny how they could work together on achieving her mentee goals despite her personal situation.

If your protégé is experiencing family difficulties, drug or alcohol misuse, depression, or other potentially complex or even life-threatening situa-

tions, then all you can do is to recommend that the individual seek the help of a psychologist or personal counselor. The best reply is as follows: “I care very much about you and want to support you as you deal with this. When we agreed to work together on advancing your career, we discussed how we might run into some circumstances about which I’m not an authority. I believe that this is one of those situations. Can we discuss available services within the community or through the company’s EAP to help you?”

### **Personality Conflicts**

Another reason for ending a mentorship, even with a talented staff member, is that you just don’t like the person. You offered to mentor someone and was given an individual by your company program whom you first liked but since have found that you are always at odds with. Yes, he is a hard worker and very talented. But your mentoring sessions with him are only turning into debates that seem to go on from one session to another. Time spent with this individual could more productively be spent with another, equally talented person within your organization who would be more willing to listen to your feedback. Let the person know that you want to see him grow, but suggest more suitable candidates as mentor for this individual. If you can’t recommend someone, suggest that your mentee meet with the program coordinator to identify suitable candidates for the role.

If you are thinking of mentoring a staff member, you can avoid such a situation by waiting through a get-acquainted period before extending an offer to be available to mentor the person.

### **A Mentee with an Achilles’ Heel**

Still another reason to get out of a mentorship is a mentee who is unable to develop the new skills important to her career advancement, despite the time you’ve spent with her. Generally, it’s not a matter of the person’s developing new abilities or knowledge but rather one of acquiring political savvy or adapting to the corporate culture. This was the problem with one mentee, her mentor told me.

#### **SAL: A MISMATCH WITH SARA**

Sara had done a terrific job on a business proposal, which was why Sal became aware of her and offered to mentor her; he envisioned her

working with him on numerous projects. Sal knew that Sara came from a more traditionally structured organization, but he didn't think she would have any difficulty working on the team-based initiatives he often became involved in. Not so. Rather than work with him on these projects, Sara buried herself behind papers stacked two feet high on her desk. When she wasn't e-mailing someone, she was issuing reports that no one was reading.

Sal tried hard to get her to change her work style, but to no avail. She was deaf to his pleas to involve herself in the team initiatives. He ultimately decided to devote his time to another individual whose work habits were more culturally in tune with his own work and the organization's new approach to the work. Clearly Sal and Sara were a mentoring mismatch. Since Sal's organization was moving toward a team-based structure, Sara was probably a hiring mistake to begin with.

I believe that Sal had another reason for wanting to sever his mentoring relationship with Sara. Like some mentors, he was concerned that he might be viewed as a failure as a mentor, based on Sara's minimal interest in team dynamics. Some mentors even worry that rather than help the up-and-comer, they may be hindering his or her development by offering the wrong advice. The reality is that many people contribute to the professional development of a new or an advancing employee. You need never worry that a less-than-perfect mentoring effort will prevent your protégé from becoming the next Bill Gates.

## Mentorships That Can Cause Problems

Before sharing some mentoring problems that can be remedied, let me address two other situations that can create problems and that may—but not always—lead to dissolving the relationship. Of these, I would agree with Harry Truman that “If you can't stand the heat. . . .”

### Cross-Gender Mentoring

Rumors can arise if you are a male manager and you choose to mentor a female employee. The situation is likewise if you are a female manager and choose to mentor a male employee. The likelihood of a sexual relationship between a manager mentor and an employee mentee can easily become subject of discussion on a corporate grapevine, regardless of the parties' personal or professional reputations. One manager was warned by his boss that he might not get a promotion he clearly had earned

because of his mentoring relationship with a female staff member, despite her fine professional reputation. The office rumor mill said that he was spending so much time with the young woman that they had to be having an affair—which they weren't!

The manager was happily married. The woman wasn't married, but she was engaged. Their meetings were always in his office. Neither had ever been the source of office gossip in the past. Yet the manager had to choose between continuing to help his administrative assistant achieve her goal of becoming a CPA or ensuring his promotion.

The press recently contacted me on this very issue. One question that was asked was, "Should a female mentee always keep the door open while being counseled by a male mentor?" My reply at the time was that no woman should find herself in a mentoring situation with a male in which she feels she has to keep the door open to protect either herself or her reputation. But in retrospect, that reply was too simplistic. Cross-gender mentoring can be open to misunderstanding in today's sexually conscious world. Those who enter into it need to be prepared to find that some people, often jealous of the special attention the mentee is getting, may spread rumors. Should you find yourself in such a situation, the good news is that the gossip mongers usually get bored when they see no fire and move on, looking for other signs of smoke.

Despite his boss's warnings, the VP of finance in our story got his promotion, although he continued to help his assistant advance in her career. Rather than dissolve the mentorship, he extended it to include another staff member—another woman—who took his job when the manager moved up. As for the administrative assistant, she received her degree in accounting, got married, and now works for a tax return processing company.

### **Reaching Down Below**

An equally awkward situation occurs when you mentor a subordinate of one of your direct reports. Don't say you would never think of it—it could happen. Maybe one of your direct reports has an employee who has lots of potential. If you decide to mentor that individual, recognize the impact that it will have not only on your new mentee's relationship with his or her boss but also on your relationship with your direct report.

Unless you see the mentorship as a short-term step before promoting the individual to the spot you have in mind, meet with your direct report and discuss his or her mentoring the individual. Such involvement will

clarify the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the mentoring relationship. Otherwise, any problems between the mentee and his or her boss will become exacerbated as the mentee reaches out to you to resolve the problems. And new problems can arise between you and the boss as the boss sees him- or herself losing control over that direct report.

## **Problems in Mentoring That Have Remedies**

So far, I've identified problems that might cause you to dissolve the mentorship and situations that can easily turn awkward. Now let's discuss some mentorship problems that are remedial.

### **Failure to Live Up to Expectations**

Either mentor, mentee, or both may be guilty of this. You may have selected among your staff members a top performer whom you thought you could make into a project leader or an informal assistant to you, but the person hasn't lived up to your expectations. That potential may still be evident to you, but the employee hasn't been following any of the developmental suggestions you have made. The employee might have misunderstood your offer to be available to provide feedback, or to serve as an advocate; instead, he or she might have interpreted it as a fast track to advancement without the need for any further effort to develop the competencies you originally saw. If this is the case, then it is time to make clear to the individual that the extra effort you are making in the form of mentoring has a price, and that it is increased performance, development of new skills or abilities, leadership of a team effort, or whatever developmental goals you both agreed on.

Of course, you, too, could be letting down the partnership. Maybe you meant it when you told your staff member that you would be accessible any time. But now you find that your calendar is too full to accommodate the time your mentee needs. Rescheduled meetings over time suggest to the mentee that he or she is a low priority for you. This is a frequent problem for managers who agree to mentor an employee.

Too often, mentors assume that initiating the mentoring relationship is more than sustaining it. Not so. Expressing your intention to mentor someone is, perhaps, at most only 10 percent toward building the partnership; the day-to-day effort—the ongoing communication and support—is the other 90 percent. When the continuous effort isn't forthcoming, no matter what your assertions about how important the employee and his

or her career are to you, the greater likelihood is that the protégé will become frustrated. He or she will become disenchanted about the relationship, even question your motives—maybe even doubt his or her own worth.

You have two options here. You can seek out someone else to mentor your employee, perhaps a peer who has more time than you do right now. Or you can find the time—maybe meet during lunch if your calendar is so busy that you can't meet in your office during the workday. Or suggest that you and the employee meet before the start of the workday or after everyone else has left.

But here's one warning: some mentees may have an expectation beyond reality as to your availability. So it is best to be clear at the beginning about how much time each month you can devote to the individual. Give too much time, and the mentee can become dependent on you. Or you may both find yourselves sitting together in the office with nothing to talk about but your wife's new job or the mentee's child's report card. If you can, commit your calendar ahead of time to meeting with the mentee as a way to ensure that you always have the agreed-upon time available.

### **Expectations of Perfection**

Another reason you may want to end your mentoring relationship is that, thinking about the two of you together, you realize that you are continually too hard on your mentee, asking more of him or her than you might do if the person were a staff member. Let me share with you an example.

#### **JACK: CUTTING ROY A LITTLE SLACK**

Before he retired, Jack enjoyed the satisfaction he got from mentoring the techies in his firm. Jack was a human resources manager, and he believed that he could broaden the perspective of these individuals, contributing to their advancement to management. In most instances, the relationships worked well. Then Jack offered to mentor Roy.

If you heard Jack, Roy couldn't do anything right when it came to working with staff. Roy even put together a training program for staff to familiarize them with new software programs, but it didn't impress Jack. Fortunately for Roy, Bob—a friend of Jack—intervened. Bob suggested that Jack join him for lunch. During the meal, he casually asked how

the mentoring was going. "I'm sorry I agreed to help Roy," Jack said. "I've mentored many young people in his field," he said, "but this is the only time when I feel as if I'm wasting my time. I feel as if I should tell Roy that he'll never be anything more than what he is now."

Bob replied, "Would that be fair to Roy?"

Jack was surprised to hear this from his friend. "What do you mean? I spend several hours a week with him, and he acts more and more like a geek."

Bob answered, "I've seen him when you aren't around and he seems pretty comfortable with people. He doesn't have the management skills he'll need to take on a job like yours or mine, but he has the interpersonal skills."

Jack started to laugh, "You're kidding, right?"

But Bob replied, "No, I'm not. For some reason, you're a tough taskmaster with Roy. Could it be that he reminds you of yourself when you were his age? I seem to recall that you weren't so smooth with people—it took another of our old buddies to make you the smooth HR manager you are today."

"You mean Bill; yeah, good old Bill," Jack said, smiling. "I was a lot like Roy when I think of it."

Jack reassessed his thinking about Roy. He realized that he made Roy uncomfortable, which explained his manner with others while he was present. They discussed the situation, and Roy agreed to give Jack a second chance. Today, Roy is a software consultant, and Jack points with pride to his finest accomplishment in a fifty-year career: Roy.

### **Communication or Stylistic Managerial Weakness**

Sometimes the problem is bigger than that which could have destroyed Jack's effort with Roy. Some managers just lack the communication or managerial styles critical to mentoring. For instance, a manager may criticize, rather than listen, or may provide the mentee with answers rather than risk the mentee's making a mistake. Or the mentor may become more than an advocate for the mentee by assuming the role of press agent, perhaps selling the mentee for a team leader role, not because this person is right for the assignment or has done a good job in similar

positions but largely because of the relationship between the mentor and the individual.

### GLENDA: WHEN ADVICE BECOMES CRITICISM

To understand the impact that such mentor behavior can have on the relationship, consider that between Glenda and her staff member Martha. Martha was one of Glenda's top engineers. Twice monthly Glenda met with Martha to work with her on her project-management skills. It was a promise Glenda had made to Martha when she persuaded her to join her division rather than go with a competitive firm. Martha's division had been downsized, but her technical know-how had caught Glenda's attention in planning discussions that had included Martha and her former boss, Howard. So when Howard's division was dissolved, Glenda immediately had sought out Martha and offered her a slot in her division.

At that time, Martha told her about a job offer she had received from a competitive firm, so Glenda went out of her way to point up the opportunities for advancement in her own area. When Martha mentioned that she was worried about her weakness in project skills, Glenda had jumped at the opportunity to offer to help Martha if she stayed with the company and agreed to join Glenda's operation. Although the word *mentor* was never mentioned, Glenda's offer encompassed all the roles of a mentor—role model, adviser, broker, and advocate—for the purpose of making Martha more at ease in project situations.

Six months passed. As Glenda promised, she continued to meet with Martha every second week. At these sessions, Glenda shared with her new staff member her own experiences in overseeing projects and critiqued Martha's efforts at improving her people skills. During the first few sessions, Martha seemed receptive to Glenda's suggestions. Since Martha and Glenda both attended several meetings together, Glenda could comment from firsthand observation, not simply listen to Martha describe situations and how she had handled them. Martha had even seemed grateful when Glenda called a break at one meeting Glenda was heading when Martha seemed to be at a loss for words in defending an idea for improving the division's intranet setup.

On the other hand, Martha showed little interest after the fact in hearing Glenda's suggestions for how Martha could have better handled the situation. Or how embarrassed Glenda had felt for Martha. "I never found myself in such a bind," she had told Martha. "You really have a problem in leading project teams. But don't worry. We'll find some way

to help you." Martha at this point sometimes seemed to go out of her way to do just the opposite of what Glenda told her to do at their mentoring meetings.

### **A Helping Hand from Howard**

No longer delighted with Glenda's offer to help, Martha had now become visibly angry about having to give up her lunch hours to meet with Glenda. It was clear to Glenda that something was wrong. So when she spotted Howard in the hallway, she asked him to come to her office to talk. When his division had been eliminated, Howard had been relocated to the company's Houston office.

"What's up?" Howard asked as he closed Glenda's office door. "I was glad to see that you were able to keep Martha. I've seen your operating numbers, and I bet some of those savings were due to her systems improvements. That woman is a technical genius."

"If she could only be as good working with project teams," Glenda said. "Martha doesn't know a thing about project management. But it shouldn't be affecting her work. Right now, the way she is acting, she would probably be happier tinkering with computers, off by herself." Glenda decided to tell Howard about her promise to Martha.

"I'm surprised she admitted her lack of project-management skills, but I'm delighted that she recognizes it as a weakness," Howard observed. "But if she could master the knack, she would be in line for a team leadership or supervisory position."

"That's what I had in mind," Glenda continued. "But the time I am spending with her isn't giving her the confidence she needs to lead a project group. In fact, she seems to have even more trouble directing the project groups she works with."

Howard then listened as Glenda described how she had instructed Martha in how to behave with the other members of the team. "I've reviewed what she has done wrong after each meeting, and I've told her how I used to handle such situations in the past. Yet she doesn't seem to change."

### **. . . And a Finger on the Problem**

Howard was silent for a moment. "I hate to say this, but the problem may be as much with your handling of the problem as with Martha's lack of know-how."

“What do you mean?” Glenda asked, sincerely interested in Howard’s view of the situation. “I thought I was giving Martha constructive criticism.”

“There is no such thing,” Howard said. “The two words just don’t belong together when you are talking about giving an employee feedback to help her deal with an obstacle to career advancement. You may have thought you were helping to build her up—that’s the constructive part—but all that the criticism has really been doing, from what you say, is tearing her down. From my own experience as a supervisor and manager, I know that employees don’t listen if you give them feedback in the form of criticism.

“By criticizing Martha all the time about her work with others and always advising her about a better way or, worse still, coming to her rescue,” Howard continued, “you are telling Martha that you think she’s hopeless in project settings. You aren’t building her self-confidence, you’re destroying what little self-confidence she had about working with others. And she’s resentful because she thought you were a friend. Instead, you’ve become her toughest critic.” [Sounds a lot like Jack, right?]

Glenda thought for a moment. After her first meeting with Martha, Glenda had to admit, she had assumed a more directive approach with Martha. Rather than ask a series of questions to help Martha identify for herself how she might better have handled situations, Glenda had jumped in with advice and lectures. In considering the situation, Glenda realized she needed to go back to the consultative approach she had used earlier if she was to rebuild her previous rapport with Martha.

Giving advice, extricating the mentee from a potentially embarrassing situation, and focusing on the “how to” rather than the reason something should be done might seem to be faster ways to mentor an employee, but these behaviors do little to build the individual’s self-confidence. At a point when you, as mentor, might want to empower your employee mentee, instead you wind up disempowering him or her.

### **Unrealistic Developmental Goals**

Glenda may have had an unrealistic expectation about how quickly Martha could learn how to interact more effectively with people. Actually, this is a problem that can go both ways. While a mentor may demand more of the mentee over a shorter time than he or she is capable of, so

too may a mentee expect more, besides time, of the mentor than he or she has the ability or willingness to provide. For instance, a mentee may expect the mentor to protect him or her from organizational pressures, perhaps even a downsizing. But the mentor may be unaware of the political problems the mentee is experiencing or, in the case of a potential layoff, the mentor may lack the clout to save the mentee from the corporate axe.

Whatever the misunderstandings, they can cause hostility to grow between the mentor and mentee. The mentor may have set goals with the mentee, and the two may have much in common, but the mentor can become an easy target if a promotion that the mentee expected isn't forthcoming or the mentee blames the mentor for a mistake, even though the mentee made it him- or herself. While the goal was to boost the mentee's performance, the emotion between the two can affect the mentee's performance and even cause it to decline.

Because such problems can arise, you have to be very specific in discussions with a prospective mentee about what you will provide. This is particularly the case when mentoring a staff member. The employee shouldn't feel that he or she will be favored over other staff members because of your extraordinary relationship.

#### **DAN: CARL—THE STAR WHO BLAMED HIS BOSS**

Carl had been relatively new to the automobile company when Dan, a vice president, made him his protégé. Only a few months later, an opening occurred in Dan's department, and Carl thought he had the position sewn up. At home, he told his wife that they would celebrate when the announcement was made.

"Carl, you're jumping to conclusions," Cindy said.

"I have no reason to worry," he told her. "If Dan didn't think I was suitable for promotion, he wouldn't have chosen to mentor me," he replied.

"Just don't be surprised if someone else gets the job," she answered as she cleared dishes from the table.

But Carl was so sure that he even told one or two of the fellows in the plant about his expectations. Put yourself in Carl's shoes when the word got out that Dan had chosen Tony for the job. Carl's pals looked to him to see what he would say, but Carl was speechless for the first time in the time they had known him.

Dan had recommended Tony for the promotion because he had the experience that Carl, a newbie to the firm, lacked. The decision was logical to everyone but Carl, who felt that his relationship with Dan gave him special privileges like being the first to be asked to lunch or to go to a ball game or to be offered a promotion.

Carl couldn't ignore the "slight" (Carl's word, not mine). He sought Dan out and asked him at the cafeteria table, "Why not me?" Dan didn't understand.

"Why what?" he asked.

"I'm your protégé, Tony isn't. How could you pass me over?" Suddenly, then, it occurred to Carl what the nature of the problem was. "I know what the matter is. I've told you all about me. You know what I think I'm good at and what I'm not. You have watched me like a policeman and you know even the smallest mistake I have made. You used that knowledge against me. That's why Tony got the job and not me."

Dan was shocked, but fortunately he was understanding. "No, Carl, that isn't the truth. Tony has had more experience and was ready for the promotion he received. You have more to learn before you are qualified for the job. You're young, and you have the potential to advance in your career. I wouldn't be mentoring you if I didn't truly believe that."

"But, Dan, I told my wife!" moaned Carl.

"Your wife, huh. I'm sorry. But you can tell her for me that she's got a pretty smart husband and, if she is as patient with you as I am, you'll be a VP in time."

"You believe that, truly?" Carl asked.

"Yes, I do," Dan replied emphatically.

I heard this story about a year ago—from Carl. He's vice president of purchasing at one of the largest automobile companies in the United States. His favorite story to new mentees is that one about the time he didn't get a promotion!

## Identifying Problems as They Occur

If you suspect that there is a problem in your mentoring relationship, you may want to use this list of ten questions to set matters straight:

1. Are we addressing your needs?
2. Do you feel a sense of satisfaction from our ongoing meetings?
3. Do you have expectations that are not being met?
4. What could be done to improve our conversations?
5. Do you feel that we are spending more time together than you now need?
6. Are there some special issues that we should put on the table and address? (For example, the likelihood of co-worker jealousies, ethnic or cross-gender communication problems, or mistaken impressions about the relationship.)
7. Do you see the same need for my help as you did originally?
8. If we have achieved our initial goals, what would be the next goals?
9. Am I still the person to help you reach your next level of accomplishments?
10. Is there someone else within the organization who would be a more appropriate mentor at this stage in your development?

The discussion may identify problems with the current relationship, but if they are ones that the mentee believes are remediable, he or she may want to continue to come to you for career advice and developmental help. The decision then falls on you to decide whether to try to improve the situation or to discontinue the relationship.

Under these circumstances you may want to walk away, but you owe it to the staff member to make an effort to revitalize the mentorship. This includes a willingness to accept responsibility for the problems that still exist. But you must also demand the same honesty and responsiveness from your protégé.

Assuming that you identify changes that you believe will turn the situation around, give the partnership a month. Then ask the same ten questions once again. If there has been no change, you are justified in ending the relationship.