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WORKING LIFE

Mentoring Can Be Messy

Companies love it, but what if that colleague just wants your job?

With new year's resolve still fresh, this is the time when many people start thinking about mentoring. Across the country, senior managers hoping to identify and influence young talent are being matched up with eager junior staffers keen for the opportunity to discuss themselves.

Companies are hot on the practice these days, believing it encourages loyalty, diversity, and cohesion. Fully half of the 500 biggest businesses in the U.S. now offer mentoring, up from about 10% five years ago, according to Menttium Corp., which sets up such programs for corporations.

Mentoring is supposed to be one of those rare activities that benefits everyone involved. But these relationships can be as intense, messy, and disappointing as any other. They can go awry in any number of ways, small and large, leaving behind disenchantment, unease, and, at worst, bitterness. "Like anything, if mentoring goes wrong it can do harm," says Faye J. Crosby, a professor of psychology at University of California at Santa Cruz who has done extensive research on the practice. She compares it to investing: Done well, it can make you rich; done poorly, you can lose a lot.

One of the most common problems, especially with formal programs, is simply that the mentor and apprentice are incompatible. As we all know, there's no accounting for chemistry. Even the best intentions and most thorough questionnaires can't always identify what might really irritate you about the other person. Different body clocks, speaking styles, or schedules can quickly frustrate a relationship.

Sometimes the mismatch goes deeper, though. One young woman who didn't want to be identified left a company within a year of joining in part because she thought her mentor wasn't doing right by some of their less significant clients. "Those weren't skills I wanted to cultivate," she says.

Respect isn't enough, though. Ideally, both people know what they want out of the arrangement. "I haven't seen a real powerful relationship that didn't have specific goals," says Kim Wise, the head of Mentor Resources. These might include learning how to manage a big project or several employees or a budget, or developing an expertise that makes a transfer more likely. And once any of that happens, it's usually time to move on, maybe to another mentor. The most successful of these relationships last no more than a year.

That doesn't mean the apprentice can't go back for advice or keep in touch. "Don't obliterate the relationship. Change the intensity," says Sheila Wellington, author of *Be Your Own Mentor*, who has outgrown a few mentors herself. Her other piece of advice: try to end gracefully, but unequivocally.

Things can get ugly when mentors won't accept that an apprentice no longer needs them. This is particularly common when men get too comfortable in their role as career coaches, especially when working with women. It's the Daddy-knows-best syndrome. Mary Cheddie, a 50-year-old human resources executive, recommended a former mentor--a man she had come to consider a friend--for a senior position at her company. She wishes she hadn't. For the first time, they were working as peers, and the decisions she made directly affected his work. "I wasn't a threat," she says. "But he had a hard time recognizing that I wasn't the junior executive anymore."

Pretty soon the relationship deteriorated. "You're no longer the person I knew," she recalls him yelling down a hallway at their office. "No, I've grown," she said. "I didn't want you to," he shouted back. Those were the last words they spoke to each other. And both eventually left the company.

ULTERIOR MOTIVE

Mentors can run into serious problems as well, none more so than the ulterior motive. Sometimes the apprentice simply wants their job. That's what happened recently to a female executive who has been mentoring women for 30 years. She describes the experience as being "thrown under the bus."

She had been working with a young woman for several months when her boss began asking pointed questions about her own performance. She couldn't figure out why until colleagues told her that her student was whispering in the boss's ear. "I didn't want to believe it," says the executive. "No one had been that duplicitous or self-serving before." Now she wants the young woman fired.

Some displays of ambition aren't quite that raw, but still do damage. Like when the young charge thinks he knows more than the mentor. Richard Laermer, the 46-year-old chief executive of rlm pr and co-author of the forthcoming book *Punk Marketing*, was developing a talented protégé who seemingly could do no wrong. Then, one day, the young guy decided that a client's business model wasn't sufficiently impressive to warrant attention. Laermer says he didn't realize what was happening until the client fired his firm. He was chagrined by the incident. "Who taught him that?" he wondered. Laermer never raised the matter with his protégé, and weeks later the man left the company of his own accord.

Laermer didn't attend his going-away party. "A lot of people thought that was terrible," Laermer says. "But I was too mad." Later, the erstwhile client was bought for a huge sum of money, a vindication of sorts for Laermer. He says: "I'm a much harder boss because of that experience."

By Susan Berfield