

[Welcome to Column 6 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website.]

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HEY JANE!

Mentoring, Part II: How do I manage a mentor-mentee relationship?

JANE SAYS:

It all boils down to being considerate. Both parties need to be considerate of each other's talents and responsibilities and needs. Here are some things to think about:

**\*Clear expectations\***

If someone wants to initiate a relationship with a mentor, she must take the first step and be clear about what she is asking for, like "would you be interested in serving on my dissertation committee, or being the chair of my committee?" or "could you read my paper and give me some suggestions on how I could improve it before I send it out for publication review?" I guess it doesn't make sense to simply ask "Will you be my mentor?," just like we don't really ask people to be our friends. It takes one step at a time to develop a friendship, and the same goes for mentoring relationships. Both parties need to be open and honest with each other about their relationship and their work.

**\*Exchange relationship\***

It is important for mentees to understand that it is an exchange relationship. Mentors need to get something out of the relationship to want to maintain/foster it, such as personal satisfaction, possible publications, potential colleague, help with a class, etc. It's not an equal exchange, but mentors do have expectations for mentees.

**\*Living up to promises\***

It is irritating when students do not "deliver the goods" in a timely manner. If the mentor asks someone to give her a new draft in a couple of weeks, and the student agreed, then the mentor should get a new draft in a couple of weeks, not in a couple of months.

**\*Lack of Knowledge/Skills\***

At the same time, the mentor should live up to promises of the mentoring. After a senior colleague has accepted a role as a mentor, he or she may discover that there is not really the common ground between the two that was expected or that the junior colleague wants assistance in an area in which the mentor does not feel particularly competent to advise. In this situation, the mentor can either contact someone else or assist her mentee in locating others whose

expertise may be more helpful for a specific need of the junior person. The mentee may also find another person yourself to get another point-of-view in a particular area.

**\*Be proactive\***

Mentors should be proactive in trying to anticipate common career needs. For example, mentors should volunteer information, such as, how to prepare for a dissertation defense, without waiting to be asked about this information.

**\*Time considerations\***

Be considerate of your mentor's time. Mentors are by definition more established in their careers. This means that they have more demands on their time than they have time to deal with them. Mentees should return phone calls and emails promptly and be on time. Be sure to ask how much time your mentor has to spend with you and abide by that request. Let your mentor suggest taking extra time if needed. You might even discuss setting aside a particular time each few weeks to talk. Studies have found that finding the time and energy for mentoring pairs to get together is a great obstacle. Take advantage of email, fax, telephone, etc., as ways of staying in touch.

For example, it is irritating when someone presumes that the mentor will immediately read something that has not met the mentor's time line. All of us have to organize our various commitments, and that includes having time to respond to a mentee's needs. Of course, if someone can't make the deadline that's okay as long as there's a reasonable explanation and a new recommended time line.

**\*Ending a relationship\***

If, after a period of time, you do not believe that either you or your mentor are able to participate in an effective mentoring relationship, then do not be averse to discussing this with your mentor and possibly ending the relationship. If the relationship does end, if at all possible, try to end it on professional terms. It is no reflection on either of you if a particular pair isn't suitable.

**\*Keeping the door open\***

Keep the door open with your mentor. You never know when you may need his or her advice or assistance at some point in the future. Do not say negative things about the mentor behind her back! Later, when the formal mentoring relationship is no longer needed (for example, you have obtained tenure or other official recognition of career advancement), consider staying in touch to provide "progress" reports. You never know when a situation will come up that you can use some good advice.

**\*Over-dependence\***

Over-dependence can go in either direction in a mentoring relationship. However, it is not wise for a junior person to become over-dependent on his/her mentor. It is helpful for mentors to encourage their junior colleagues to have other mentors and to eventually anticipate the end of the formal mentoring relationship. It should be everyone's goal to eventually become full-fledged colleagues, although it is always nice to have someone to go to, who knows you, for advice at any time in the future.

**\* Thanking a mentor\***

It is very important to acknowledge a mentor's efforts, even informal mentoring. Most formal mentors prefer an old-fashioned card (not an ecard or an email note) sent to them. If a mentor helps you with a dissertation, put them in the acknowledgement, and send them a copy of your completed work with the acknowledgement. If you are writing an article that you get feedback on, acknowledge them in the article, and send them the published piece.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned next month for Question 7!

-- Jane