

How to Break Up with Your Mentor

by Carolyn O'Hara

MAY 29, 2014

Having a great mentor can do wonders for your professional development and career. But even the best mentoring relationships can run their course or become ineffective. How do you know when it's time to move on? And what's the best way to end the relationship without burning bridges?

What the Experts Say

“A good mentoring relationship is as long as it should be and no longer,” says Jodi Glickman, author of *Great on the Job*. If you are no longer learning from your mentor or the chemistry is simply not there, “there’s no point in prolonging it.” You do yourself and your mentor a disservice if you stay in a relationship that isn’t meeting your needs. “If in order to grow, it’s necessary to move on,” don’t hesitate to break it off, says Kathy Kram, the Shipley Professor in Management at the Boston University School of Management and coauthor of the forthcoming *Strategic Relationships at Work*. Here’s how to end things graciously.

Take stock of your needs and goals

Ask yourself what value you’ve gained from your mentor, what guidance and support you feel you aren’t getting, and what you want going forward. With introspection, you can figure out “what’s missing in the relationship and whether there is an opportunity to reshape it in some way,” says Kram. You may decide that your mentor’s skill set doesn’t align with where your career is heading. Or you may want a mentor with whom you have a better rapport, or who has more time to offer. The exercise may even surprise you. You could discover that you haven’t been taking full advantage of your mentor’s expertise, for example.

Consider giving your mentor a second chance

Don't assume that your mentor has a crystal ball. If you aren't getting the guidance you want, it may be because you haven't articulated your expectations and needs. "People don't realize they need to educate their mentors, too," says Kram. You should spell out "what you are striving toward and how you think your mentor can help." Consider approaching him to make your needs clear, saying, "These are the challenges I'm now facing and this is the kind of advice I'm hoping to get." That said, "if you feel like you've both received and given value but going forward it's the law of diminishing returns, it's time to end it," says Glickman.

Don't draw it out

If you decide the relationship isn't working, act on it quickly. "You don't want to waste your time, or frankly theirs," says Glickman. If your mentor-mentee arrangement is more formal, it's often advisable to arrange a time to discuss the issue face-to-face. But not everyone has to break up over lunch. Depending on the nature of your previous interactions, parting ways could involve a note or a telephone call, or be as simple as letting the relationship fade away. But however you do it, don't drag out your interactions with him if you don't plan on investing in the relationship and taking it seriously.

Disengage with gratitude

"Gratitude is the key to leaving gracefully," says Kram. Start the separation conversation by thanking your mentor for all of her time and effort. Detail what you've learned in the course of the relationship and how those skills will help your career in the future. "Speak in terms of how your needs have changed rather than in how your mentor is not doing x,y, and z for you," says Kram. "Maintain the focus on yourself and your reasons for wanting to move on." By keeping it positive, you'll leave open the possibility of future collaborations.

Be transparent and direct

Be as honest and transparent as possible about why your future plans necessitate a shift, says Glickman. You might say, "Given my change in focus, I wonder if getting together regularly is the best use of your time." Don't worry too much that they will be upset or offended. "Prolonging a relationship out of respect for them doesn't help them," says Glickman. "They likely have plenty

of other things they can do.” If your mentor does react negatively, “listen well, give him the opportunity to share his perspective, and if you don’t agree, just thank him for having shared it” and move on, says Kram.

Keep the door open

In today’s workplace, connections are more important than ever, and you’re likely to come across your former mentor at some point in the future. Since you want to part ways with your professional reputation intact, make every effort not to burn bridges. Be sure to offer her any assistance she might need in the future so you can return the kindness and help she has given you. “You never know when you are going to encounter this person again, whether as a boss, a subordinate, or a peer,” says Kram. “And you never know if you might need them again.”

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Consider whether the relationship can be recharged – give your mentor an opportunity to adapt with you
- Emphasize your appreciation and thanks above all else
- Describe what you’ve learned from them and how those skills will help your career going forward

Don’t:

- Stay in the relationship out of obligation – you’ll only waste your time and theirs
- Focus on the relationship’s shortcomings – emphasize the positive
- Burn bridges – you never know when you might encounter them again

Case Study #1: Establish expectations early on

When Debby Carreau was promoted from the operations side of a multibillion-dollar hospitality company to a high-level HR position, her boss assigned her a mentor to help with the transition. For the first several months, Debby and her mentor (we'll call him Jeff) had a productive and positive rapport. He was very helpful with developing Debby's strategy skills. "He taught me to step back and look at the bigger picture," she says.

One day, as Debby was conducting a sound check for a presentation at a major conference, Jeff walked in and requested a run-through. He proceeded to dissect her talk and suggested a number of changes. "I suspect his intentions were good, but I felt blindsided," Debby says. She considered his input, but did not incorporate many of his suggestions. Following her well-received speech, she heard from a colleague that Jeff was upset, telling several people that he "didn't know why he bothered giving her advice if she isn't going to listen to it." At that point, "I knew this relationship was not going to work. While I valued his input and feedback, I was not always going to act on it," Debby says.

Debby approached Jeff the next morning. "I focused on what I appreciated specifically, thanking him for his insight into strategy and his best-practice sharing," she says. But after confirming that he had been disappointed with her failure to take his advice, Debby politely pushed back, saying that while she valued his opinion, she wasn't under the impression she was obligated to follow his directions.

They left the conference on good terms, but their formal mentoring relationship petered out not long after. Her lesson? It's critical for mentors and mentees to establish "on the front end what the expectations are and how you are going to engage."

Case Study #2: Exit gracefully

Chris Hoffman, a marketing and brand strategy consultant in Colorado Springs, knew he owed much of his professional development to his boss, a marketing executive we'll call Frank. Chris had sought him out as a mentor, taking him to coffee, buying him lunch, and picking his brain about marketing and problem-solving strategies. "I really learned so much from him," Chris says.

But after working at Frank’s agency for four years, Chris began to feel that he’d outgrown his position – and his mentee relationship with Frank. He had learned a great deal, but other frustrations – Frank’s unnecessary distance from the day-to-day operations, his disinterest in feedback, and their value differences – made Chris feel increasingly disillusioned. “It was time for me to pursue my own endeavors and break out on my own,” Chris says.

His departure from the agency provided a natural transition point. During their final conversations, Chris emphasized how grateful he was for Frank having “invested in me with his time and his knowledge.” Chris recapped the great things they’d been able to accomplish, and “made a conscious effort to come across as humble instead of focusing on my frustrations.”

Frank offered to continue mentoring Chris after he left the agency, but Chris politely deflected the requests. “I told him truthfully that I had some new projects that I needed to spend 100 percent of my time on,” he says. He also stopped reaching out to Frank, and over time the relationship settled into an amicable friendship. “I see him from time to time and it’s not awkward at all,” Chris says. “I’ve actually done some contract work for his company since moving on, so that’s a win for me.”



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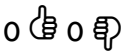
aharrell2000 4 years ago

"Mentoring" is a two-way "Development" apparatus. If one party is not getting the development needed then transparency/honesty which hopefully the pairing is built on will take its course. You may find the break-up.....is mutual.

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