

CUBICLE CULTURE

By JARED SANDBERG



With Bad Mentors, It's Better to Break Up Than to Make Up

It's hard to break up with your mentor, as Luciann Lajoie learned.

When she was working in the marketing department of a theater company, Ms. Lajoie was assigned a mentor who never got into the weeds of some of her specific questions. Instead, she would boil down her advice to things like: "It's about the relationship" and "You'll get it figured out." Meanwhile, just an "I don't know" might have been more honest.

Having given up on learning any hard skills, Ms. Lajoie initiated Project Politely Ignore, which meant she would make nice when necessary, but ask fewer and fewer questions of her mentor to minimize contact. After all, the tactic worked well in breaking up after dating, she reasoned. The challenge was that this was a relationship that had to be preserved. Eventually, the mentoring dissipated without a hitch.

In the end, Ms. Lajoie learned some useful tips on applying makeup and how much cinnamon to add to the coffee before percolating. "That's the only advice I still use from her," Ms. Lajoie, a strategy consultant for consulting firm Executive Leadership Group, says of her mentor.

1 DISCUSS

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Successful people usually credit their rise to the good counsel of mentors who can work wonders. But when a mentor takes you under a wing

you don't want to be under, it becomes a trap that's hard to escape.

Yes, relationships matter in the workplace. But "bad mentoring

relationships are worse than no relationship at all," says Jean Rhodes, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Research shows, she says, that "negative interactions are much more salient than positive ones."

Formal mentoring efforts, with their online profiles and random assigning of mentors who often lack interpersonal skills, can seem like pairing up with the worst blind date. "Formal programs are generally less effective," says Kathy Kram, a professor of organizational behavior at Boston University School of Management.

Mentors need training, she says. Also, no mentee should rely on only one mentor who, if canned, can drag a mentee down. "To rely on one mentor is really a high-risk strategy," she says.

There are many reasons why you might want to ditch your mentor. Research has identified a typology of negative mentor behaviors that include sabotage, bullying, revenge-seeking and exploitation. Then there are those who mistake their own ancient successes for relevant advice.

The breakup with a mentor resembles the breakup with a significant other whose militaristically organized sock drawer is symptomatic of a larger lack of chemistry.

Ellen Ensher, associate professor of management at Loyola Marymount University and author of "Power Mentoring," recommends mentees take an It's-not-about-you-it's-about-me approach. She advises unhappy mentees to write a letter to their unwanted guides. It should state what you've learned from the person, but then conclude with a line such as: "At this point we've learned everything we can learn from each other." Or perhaps: "I'm in a new role. ... I don't have the time that our relationship requires."

A mentee can also hand off a mentor to another employee, which she admits sounds like saying, "Date my sister instead."

Prof. Ensher also believes that mentoring "needs to be polygamous rather than monogamous."

Part of the art of breaking up with your mentor is blaming the separation on a higher authority. When Adrian Gonzalez started his new job at a manufacturer, he was assigned to share a cubicle with a senior peer assigned to mentor him. All his mentor really wanted was an ally in his stab-in-the-back criticisms of their colleagues. When a cubicle opened up elsewhere, Mr. Gonzalez secretly lobbied for it while making it seem like his move was someone else's decision.

"If the guy were in a more influential position," says Mr. Gonzalez, "he could have made my life a living hell."

You don't have to tell that to Joe Silverman, whose mentor in a former job in personnel research was his boss. The man, he says, lived in his own world, evidenced by his droning on despite the glazed eyes and lack of any follow-up questions.

"He wasn't going to develop me for anything. It was frustrating. It was the kind of thing where you'd come home and kick the cat," says Mr. Silverman, who thankfully didn't own a cat. "A field goal was a good possibility."

He applied for a job at another company and his boss's boss found out, convincing him to stay and moving him slowly out from underneath his supervisor's wing.

If your mentor can greatly affect your career, "Learn to love it!" says management consultant Marshall Goldsmith, who advises people to treat such a mentor as a customer whose boring stories and unfunny jokes you both listen to and laugh at.

As for the war stories: "What they did might be completely dysfunctional, and they were successful in spite of it," he warns.

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