

HEY JANE! Issue 6

The first edition of this Hey Jane! column was produced in 2004 by the Career Development Committee. More recently we include column authorship. In this revised edition, Mindy Fried and Laura Kramer collaborated to update the original posting.

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

This issue is aimed at helping you manage your mentor-mentee relationships. While we may think of mentoring in a more formal sense, much of this issue also applies to relationships in which informal mentoring occurs.

JANE SAYS:

As with any relationship, two guiding principles for mentoring relationships are respect and clear communication. Initially, it's important for the mentor and mentee to agree upon the parameters and nature of their mentoring relationship, including the type of help the mentee hopes to get from the mentor, and the frequency of contact and length of the relationship. It's also a good idea for mentors and mentees to reach an agreement about confidentiality, where relevant, and to set up a schedule for communicating, whether in person, by phone, email or Skype.

Once the parameters of the relationship are set...

If you are a mentor, it's important to:

- Listen well to the mentee, so you can understand the help being sought and figure out the best strategy for helping
- Ask the mentee probing questions about what help is needed, and respond directly to those needs
- Give the mentee direct advice, when warranted
- Share your relevant experiences, including successes and failures
- Offer constructive feedback
- Share your resources, expertise and networks
- Respond in a timely manner to communications from the mentee
- Respond to the mentee's frustrations and challenges with understanding, encouragement and praise.

If you are looking for a mentor, here are some things to think about:

- Selecting a possible mentor

What criteria should you use to select a mentor? You may select a mentor based on their areas of expertise, and/or based on their position in your university/workplace or outside of your university/workplace.

- Approaching a possible mentor

You can approach a potential mentor in person or via email. In your initial communication be clear and succinct, explaining why you would like to work with them, the stage you're at in your career, and the kind of help you hope they can provide to you. You should be prepared to articulate two or three things you want help with (e.g., support with networking, advice about getting tenure, making the transition from a tenure track job to the applied world).

Alternatively, if there's a particular role you want the mentor to take, you can ask specific questions, such as, "Would you be interested in serving on my dissertation committee?" or "Would you be the chair of my committee?" Asking for concrete support based on specific needs makes it easier for a potential mentor to consider whether they have the knowledge, skills and experience to help you.

When you initially approach a possible mentor, it's also important to be respectful of their schedule and time constraints. However you say it, let them know that you recognize that they're busy people, and that you're grateful that they're taking time to talk with you (and possibly work with you). Even if a mentor is enthusiastic about working with you, other commitments may make that impossible - time is always an issue! A mentoring relationship, like any connection, takes time to develop, and the clearer you can be, the easier it will be for the potential mentor to respond.

- **It's an exchange relationship**

A mentor-mentee relationship is an exchange relationship. That means that both parties need to get something out of the connection. For you, as a mentee, you're looking for advice, support, suggestions, connections, etc. Mentors may be drawn to working with you because of the personal satisfaction of helping someone, as well as a feminist commitment to fostering growth among their younger and/or less experienced colleagues. They may also see you as a potential colleague, someone they may partner with, at some point, on a publication or project or a class. Even if the support tends to be "one-way" for now, with the mentor providing support to you, that dynamic may change over time as you find ways to support and/or collaborate with the mentor. Moreover, throughout our professional life, we may seek mentors among our peers as well. Mentoring is a life-long proposition, and we benefit from mentoring support throughout our professional lives.

Of course, both parties need to live up to their promises. For example, if you schedule a conversation with your mentor, show up on time. If something comes up, contact them immediately so you don't inconvenience them. Avoid making a pattern of changing meeting times at the last minute. If there is a deliverable, like a draft or a C.V., that you have promised the mentor by a certain time, do your best to deliver. If life intervenes, contact them right away. Likewise, if a mentor has committed to being available at a certain time or giving you feedback (e.g., on a draft for publication) by a certain date, that should be something you can count on.

- **Over-dependence**

While a mentor may be a powerful support, it is often advisable that mentees not rely too heavily on her/his mentor (or, for that matter, for the mentor to be overinvested in the relationship). Mentees may want to have multiple mentors, and mentors should encourage their mentees to not rely solely on their support.

- **Is it a good match?**

When a mentoring relationship is established, it's always a good idea to establish check-in points (perhaps every six months, or more frequently) when you will both explicitly discuss whether the relationship is accomplishing its purpose. Having this fixed check-in period defines its evaluation as a normal process rather than a sign of dysfunction. If it's going well, it's useful to articulate what is positive about the mentoring relationship. If there are "issues", a check-in

may allow you to find a way to change how you are working together to make it more effective.

If it's not going well, you might decide it makes most sense to end the arrangement. There are a number of reasons why either or both of you may think it is best to end the mentoring relationship. You and your mentor may not have enough common ground; your styles may be incompatible; or perhaps you have found someone else who is a better match (e.g., has more relevant resources, or contacts).

Key to all of this is clear communication. You and the mentor need to be upfront with one another about whether or not it's working. If you decide it's time to move on, you can even ask the mentor to suggest someone else, or you may want to initiate your own search. Maybe you want another point-of-view or someone who has access to a different network. If you do decide to move away from a particular mentor, it's important to acknowledge how much you appreciate what that person has done for you, and to frame your desire to find someone else based on professional criteria and not personality differences (even if the latter contribute to your decision to switch).

- **Bringing the formal mentoring relationship to a close**

While the rare mentoring relationship lasts a lifetime, it's far more common for the relationship to be time-limited. As the mentoring relationship evolves, it's important that mentors and mentees plan for the end of their formal mentoring relationship, with the mentor providing guidance to the mentee on next steps.

After your formal mentoring relationship has ended (regardless of the reason for its ending), keep the door open between you. Even after the original purpose of the mentoring relationship has been served, consider staying in touch to provide "progress" reports. And of course, if the relationship didn't work out, do not say negative things about the mentor to others.. You never know when a situation will come up where you can use some good advice. As time passes, the original mentor may turn to the original mentee for advice, as well!

- **Thanking a mentor**

Thanking a mentor should happen throughout the mentoring relationship. A simple thanks – with specifics about what the mentor did for you that was helpful – will be appreciated! And of course, at the end of the formal mentoring relationship, you should thank your mentor more heartily, with a note or some other symbol of your appreciation.

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! -- Jane