



Career Advice for Women and Men

Let your junior colleagues—all of them, not just the ones you have the most rapport with—know what kind of advice or help you're prepared to offer.

Niche Mentoring: How to Give Advice and Offer Help from Your Areas of Strength

Most of us have seen or heard about extraordinary mentors (e.g., reference 1), just as most of us have seen or heard about extraordinary teachers. By definition, “extraordinary” is not the norm.

Our goal in this column is to widen the group of people who provide advice, information, advocacy, and other mentoring activities. We do so by suggesting that people concentrate on providing the activities and opportunities where they can be most helpful. By defining your area of expertise, you can provide focused advice with a very reasonable time commitment.

We offer here some suggestions about how to give advice and other help, based in part on our own experience and on tips from the Internet (e.g., reference 2).

This approach can be used by senior faculty to give advice to junior faculty but can be equally effective to advise mid-career faculty and in peer-to-peer situations.

Preliminaries

Before getting started, it is important to decide what kind of mentoring you are going to offer and to put yourself in the right frame of mind. Here are some ideas to consider.

1. Decide what you're good at and concentrate on offering advice or help in those areas. Some people, for example, are very good at writing grants and talking to funding agencies. They can provide excellent help in that arena. Other people might be especially good at talking

warmly and helping a student or colleague feel that they are part of things. Let your junior colleagues—all of them, not just the ones you have the most rapport with—know what kind of advice or help you're prepared to offer. Be ready to say that you are not the best person to ask about *x*, and suggest another person who might be better on that topic.

2. Be aware that there are two broad kinds of help one can offer people: help that is directly related to the progress of their career, and help that is psychologically tinged and supportive.³ Think carefully ahead of time about which type of help

you are competent and comfortable giving.

3. Decide how much time you're willing to spend. You might not be willing to read someone's entire grant proposal, because that would be too time-consuming, but you might be willing to spend 15–30 minutes discussing

overall strategy, or you might be willing to read their first few introductory paragraphs or their specific aims page or their biosketch. As another example, you might invite a junior colleague to have coffee with you, with no agenda other than getting to know the other person and making them feel welcome.

4. Be prepared to look at things from the point of view of the person you're talking to, even if that is not your point of view or approach. There's no value in telling someone to pull up their socks, or suck it up, or get on with it. They would have done that on their own if they could have. Think about what seems possible for that person, given what they have told you about themselves. Then query them about whether they think it would help to try a



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particular new approach.

Giving the Advice or Help

Here are some things to keep in mind while you are mentoring to help make it a good experience for both the mentee and yourself.

1. Listen carefully and attentively to what the person is saying. Paraphrase what they say to make sure you understand what they are asking for.

2. Concentrate on how you can help the person reach their own goals. Their own goals may be different from the goals you would like them to have. You may have ideas about what are realistic goals for the person, but that would be a different conversation.

3. Don't promise more than you can deliver. Think about the long-term consequences of your willingness to provide advice or help. You don't want to renege on an implied promise. It's better to offer less and deliver reliably than to offer more and be inconsistent.

4. Be constructive. Don't even think about making negative personal remarks. If you don't think you can be constructive, don't do or say anything. Two of us heard someone give a talk in a way that started out unnecessarily badly. We knew just what she should have done. But we had only just met her and there was no approach that would not have made her feel like an idiot for starting as she had. Some people make people feel bad. Don't be one of those people.

5. Use your perspective to identify expert colleagues who might be more appropriate than you to provide topic-specific advice. In initial discussions with prospective mentees, apprise

them of these alternatives, encourage them to seek out these other people, and help them articulate well-defined requests should they take this route. Also indicate that people can differ in their judgments about the best course of action in a given case, so it may be helpful to have more than one mentor for particular career-related questions.

If you have held back from mentoring because you did not think you were wise enough, try the “niche mentoring” approach described here. You will find that you do, indeed, have much to offer others and at the same time in a very targeted, efficient way you will become known as the “expert” in your mentoring niche. ■

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Note

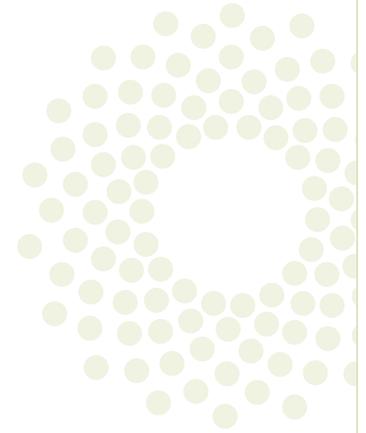
This column is adapted from a forthcoming book by Abigail Stewart and Virginia Valian.

References and Footnote

¹Lee A, Dennis C, Campbell P (2007). Nature's guide for mentors. *Nature*, 447, 791–797.

²www.wikihow.com/Give-People-Advice.

³Kram KE (1985). *Mentoring at Work*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.



Some people make people feel bad. Don't be one of those people.

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