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. 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
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.

—Sandra K. Masur, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai; Abigail Stewart, University of Michigan; and Virginia V. Valian, Hunter College, City University of New York

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

References and Footnote
2www.wikihow.com/Give-People-Advice.

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