My last post, "Breaking Up is Hard to Do," described a mentor-mentee relationship that went sour. Since the end of that relationship, I've given considerable thought to the dynamics of mentor-mentee encounters and analyzed what my mentee and I could have done to prevent things from ending so uncomfortably. Upon reflection, it's clear that we would have both benefited from more defined boundaries and greater clarity about what my mentee hoped to achieve.

I will be the first to admit that being overly formal feels awkward. I can't exactly picture myself saying things like, "I can meet with you once a month as long as you promise not to whine, call, or e-mail constantly with questions that have obvious answers, or get angry when I tell you that your fondness for sarcasm is making people hate you." So, rather than put the onus on the mentor to define the rules of the engagement, I'd appreciate mentees considering the following guidance.

Have an agenda. While it can be lots of fun to chitchat with another person, be organized when it comes to spending time with your mentor. Let your mentor know what you hope to learn or accomplish and then partner to create a plan to make this happen.

Create time limits. While you are always free to extend the duration of your mentor-mentee relationship, announcing an end date — "I'd appreciate the opportunity to meet with you once a month for the next six months" — can make the time commitment "doable" for your would-be mentor and provides you each with a graceful escape hatch.

Do not confuse your mentor with a therapist or a fortuneteller. Your mentor is available to help you navigate your professional career, not your personal life. It is best to keep your worries about your wife's eating disorder, your son's drug use, and your father's gambling habits to yourself. Likewise, your mentor is not all knowing and cannot predict whether reviewers will like your paper, if you will get tenure, or how long it will take the search committee to decide if they want you back.

Reciprocate. While there are some who believe that mentors should give of themselves selflessly, the best mentor-mentee relationships benefit both parties. As a mentee, you probably have some knowledge, perspectives, connections, or vital gossip that your mentor would appreciate. Make yourself useful and you will make yourself worth the investment of time.

Create a feedback loop. Did the script your mentor gave you to ask for a raise actually work? Let her know. Did your mentor’s advice to resign from the curriculum committee prompt an angry call from your department chair? Pass that along. You are under no obligation to take your mentor’s advice, but when you do, let your mentor know how it worked out.

Express a little gratitude. The best mentors are often the busiest people and they are carving out time to help you be successful. Let them know that you appreciate their commitment to your success.

What other advice would you give to current or potential mentees?

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Sounds to me like you need to better define what your image of a mentor is. I have mentored many people, and never found that there was a meaningful separation between life goals and professional goals. In fact, without knowing the mentee's situation in life and their values, hopes and dreams, wouldn't one give fairly superficial, technique-based "advice"?

johnsonr3: Fair question. Perhaps my comments were influenced by my experience with people who claim to want to talk about their professional careers, but then focus almost exclusively on their personal issues. Life goals are fascinating to me, but chronic personal drama tends to wear to me down. I'm not proud of that, but it is something I have come to recognize.