



Is Mentoring a Good Idea?

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Certainly having role models is a good idea, especially to encourage underrepresented groups to participate in any given field or enterprise. And mentors can help their protégés understand the organization, its politics, and how to get things done. Mentors can no doubt also provide sage career advice, serve as a friendly critic, and champion their protégé, though how often any of these things actually occurs is, I think, debatable.

There comes a point, however, when mentors become a crutch or even an impediment, and I would argue this occurs earlier in a protégé's career than many think. Too often, mentors mold their younger colleague into an image of themselves. But a clone of the mentor with the same old way of thinking is rarely what an organization needs; it usually needs innovative and fresh approaches. That is the crucial resource that the young bring to the table.

I cringe when I see protégés worshiping their mentors and taking everything that is offered as sacred knowledge. (And am I being sexist here, or do I just have a small sample set, but does it seem that this is most often a problem with female protégés?)

At some point, a protégé has to depart from his/her mentor—usually the earlier, the better. I always told the graduate students I was supervising that one sure sign of real progress in their thesis research is when they begin to disagree or argue with their thesis advisor.

Indeed, in the case of scientists, many of the most brilliant and productive (Newton, Einstein, etc.) never really had mentors. Other great scientists did have mentors, but broke with them at some point before achieving their greatest accomplishments.

I guess what I am suggesting is, don't spurn mentoring, but watch out for its downside and end it sooner rather than later.