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First, Do No Harm . . .

by Dr. Linda Phillips-Jones (in memoriam) slightly edited by Dr. G. Brian Jones

We've always admired the dictum that physicians learn in their training: "*First, do no harm.*" Hippocrates wrote: "*... make a habit of two things—to help, or at least do no harm.*"

That's a powerful challenge, especially when physicians and other medical personnel are under pressure, facing life-and-death decisions, and often using methods that are far from risk-free.

As mentors, our responsibilities seem so much less risky. But are they? Can we, even without meaning to, leave our mentees worse off (emotionally, spiritually, socially, and Intellectually if not physically) than when we began with them? What are some danger zones we might enter? Here are five possibly harmful actions to avoid as you look at your existing and future mentoring relationships.

1. Promising too much.

Years ago, when Dr. Linda first started mentoring, She made the giant mistake of telling her mentees that she'd always be in their lives. They could count on her indefinitely. As the years went on, the numbers of mentees increased, and she changed cities, she couldn't keep that promise. You won't be able to either. Making unrealistic promises will almost always disappoint mentees. You could contribute to a negative view of mentoring.

A better way: Be very careful about what you agree to do, how often you say you'll do it, what you tell your mentees they'll gain as a result of your mentoring time together, and what your relationship will look like once the formal mentoring part ends. Be conservative in the beginning, and add more later provided you have the interest and time to deliver on new promises. Help your mentees learn how to use a short term yet potentially valuable helping relationship. Keep the door open for them to call or write you in the future, but be realistic about how much you can offer in response. One mentor recently told us, "*My ex-mentees sometimes send me long e-mails. I told them I enjoy hearing from them, but they should only expect a paragraph at most in reply, and that may take a week or two.*"

2. Discouraging dreams.

Two quick stories: The other day in a crowded store, an irritated dad said loudly to his teenage daughter: "*What? Money for SAT prep? You've got to be kidding. You're not even college material.*" . . . In a mentor training workshop, when senior managers were asked what they'd say to mentees who expressed interest in becoming managers, they groaned and laughed derisively: "*Management!! Why? You have no idea what headaches you're setting yourself up for!*"

Were these mentors saying what they thought would be helpful to their mentees? Yes. Were they perhaps doing harm? Yes indeed.

A better way: We at The Mentoring Group hold a big bias on this topic. We believe as mentors, you should *err in the direction of encouraging* your mentees to pursue their goals, not discouraging them. They receive more than enough messages from skeptics and critics about how they *can't* do it, *won't* make it, and should *be practical* and *think small*.

Did someone in *your* past say, "*Go for it*"? Be one bright ray of hope in your

mentees' lives. Help them take some initial steps and do their own research in order to make their ultimate decisions.

3. Breaking confidentiality.

You sit on a committee with your mentee's boss and one day ask him how your mentee is doing on the job. . . . Enthusiastically, you introduce your mentee as "my mentee" to a group you two pass in the hall. . . . You're so pleased to hear about your mentee's promotion that you proudly tell your spouse and several other people about the good news. Ouch. You just stepped over the line. Unless your mentee approved each of these actions, you broke confidentiality, and that could harm not only your mentoring relationship but your mentee.

A better way: A cardinal rule of adult mentor-adult mentee relationships is this: *What's said between us stays between us*. Mentoring relationships with this kind of trust tend to flourish. Without it, relationships either end prematurely or operate on a very superficial level. In the examples above, even though you were intending to help, you made mistakes. Always get your mentee's permission to talk about her/him with people. Find out if and how he/she wants to be referred to in front of others. Check before telling any news, including *good* news. Double check your organization's rules about what is and isn't confidential. Ethically and legally, you may not be able to keep certain things confidential, so let your mentees know where you would have to break confidentiality.

4. Comparing unfairly.

Your natural inclination is to compare your mentees with yourself at their ages or stages of life. In addition, you probably compare each mentee with the especially enjoyable and successful mentees you've mentored in the past. In both instances, you're *generalizing* about what may not be true. Even if you keep this information to yourself, your thoughts are influencing your *beliefs* about each mentoring partner and therefore how you act around him/her.

A better way: When these comparisons enter your mind, acknowledge them briefly, STOP the thoughts, and SUBSTITUTE another more useful thought. For example: "*Hmmm, Stan reminds me so much of me when I was 25, although I was so timid and he's Mr. Confident.*" STOP. SUBSTITUTE: "*Hmmm, Stan may or may not be as confident as he sounds. How could I check out how he really views himself?*" Prepare to be pleasantly surprised by each mentee, and treat each as One of a Kind.

5. Misusing your power.

This is the greatest danger zone of all. As a trusted and respected mentor, you have more power than you think you have to influence your mentees. You can *positively* or *negatively* affect their critical life decisions, beliefs about themselves and others, and their views about matters large and small. Many mentees will want to please you at all costs. Some may fall in love with or idolize you.

Too often, mentors are unaware of their power to discourage. Because you're so important to mentees, what you say and do will matter greatly. A flip or joking answer on your part can easily be taken seriously by your mentees. Most won't want to bother you with questions or concerns they consider silly or obvious. If you casually say, "*Just call me if you need me*" (without nailing down a specific time to meet), they probably won't.

A better way: Accept the fact that most mentors, including you, have a lot of power in mentees' lives. Be aware of the Awe Factor, which could inhibit your relationships and make you seem overly "awesome," unapproachable, or on a pedestal. Let your mentees know that you make mistakes and don't have all the answers. Rather than giving advice, share what you've tried and what has happened to you. Watch what you say, especially about their abilities, character, and futures. It's okay to mention potential challenges, but let mentees try anyway and make their own mistakes.

Here's the most important caution. Your role as a mentor is much like that of a counselor. You can harm your mentees if you get romantically involved with them.

Keep the relationship strictly professional. From the beginning, set strict boundaries, and refuse to cross the line. If your mentee professes romantic feelings for you, say you're flattered and yet you won't be able to reciprocate those feelings. Treat her/him with the utmost respect and honor. If appropriate, help your mentee find another mentor.

Don't let these danger zones deter you from being a willing mentor. Just as we need and value dedicated, risk-taking physicians, we need you to mentor the next generation.

For more ideas on being an effective mentor, see our [Archive](#) and [Products](#).



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