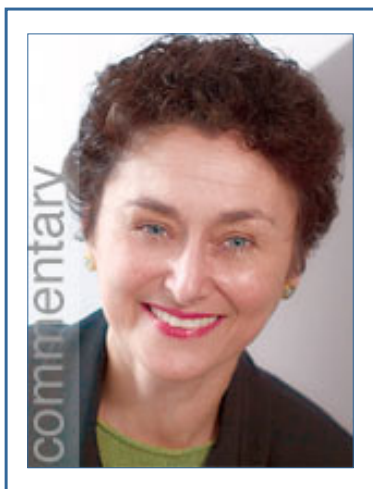


Third Opinion

When Mentors Fail to Go The Distance

Saj-nicole Joni 05.21.08, 12:50 PM ET



The question of what to do with a mentor you have outgrown has recently played out all over the political landscape. Hillary Clinton fired her long-time pollster and adviser Mark Penn over potential conflicts of interest, while John McCain wrestled with the endorsement of John Hagee, a minister with some controversial views.

And, perhaps most publicly, the messy struggle of Barack Obama and his former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright has touched a chord with leaders everywhere. The problem is ancient and has been discussed through the ages — for example, when Shakespeare's Prince Hal finally becomes Henry V, he must cast aside his mentor, the outsized, devil-may-care giant, Falstaff.

In the weeks since Senator Obama fully repudiated and rejected Wright's rhetoric, many CEOs and top executives have wanted to talk privately about it — because they, too, have faced these kinds of wrenching choices, and they understand what's at stake. In essence, it's a defining moment of leadership.

What should you as a leader do when you are deeply indebted to a mentor, but you are sensing that he should no longer be part of your inner circle? If you don't distance yourself from the mentor, you risk his behavior slowing your rise, maybe even setting you back. It's not just about you — it's about your commitment to your team, your commitment to results and your commitment to your organization. And yet, your mentor is someone that you care about, someone who is likely to be hurt and angry. This is the hard part — the part they don't usually teach in business school or in your company's mentoring program.

Here are five of the common signs that it's time to leave your mentor:

- Your mentor has become increasingly controversial, perhaps for reasons unrelated to you. And he is doing things that show poor judgment. You are aware of the situation, but you keep putting it to the back of your mind because of your deep friendship.
- You go to your mentor for input less and less often. You just don't believe the advice you're getting is valuable on certain matters. Or perhaps you deliberately leave some things unsaid. You sense a growing tension as you want to move out on your own, but you're concerned about possible repercussions.
- You're too entwined with your mentor emotionally. Perhaps you and your families have become friends. You are protecting his feelings, because you really do care.

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- You're not getting to the bottom of things in discussions with her anymore. You don't want to know everything that's going on in her realm, and you don't really want her to know about you either.
- While your relationship with your mentor has changed, the perception of it within the organization has not, and that is becoming a liability for you. People aren't coming to you with information you need because they don't trust your mentor, and they are not sure where you stand.

Each of these signs points to a critical moment when you are going to have to act. You must exclude the mentor from your inner circle or risk derailing your leadership. How can you minimize the pain and the risk? A few suggestions for this difficult rite of passage in the life of a leader:

- Make it a clean break on the business side, but signal that you would like to maintain the friendship. This is difficult to do, but it can work, and everyone gets to save face. And sometimes the friendship can be saved.
- Be fully prepared to lose the friendship and yet do everything possible not to have that happen. Think deeply about examples of other relationships that have successfully weathered cycles of closeness and distance. Make a commitment to the relationship that reaches beyond the need for space right now.
- Create a ceremonial moment. Tell your mentor, "You've seen me through so much. I'm ready to take it on my own. I'd like to celebrate my 'graduation' with you." Then give him a gift over a celebratory dinner.
- If you have the authority, create a new role for your mentor, one that takes her out of day-to-day contact with you, your issues and your teams.

Understand that despite your best efforts it may get ugly, as recently displayed by Wright's acting out on a public stage against Obama, when he felt rejected. Be prepared to go the distance before you start. If this happens, you must be ready to weather the storm.

This is a good moment to take inventory of your mentors and ask the hard questions. Don't wait until the costs threaten all you've worked for. And if you see any upcoming leaders who report to you and who are making this mistake, don't wait to confront them either. Intervene, give them real feedback, and teach them these lessons before they are lost to you and the organization.

Casting aside a mentor raises very personal questions about character, loyalty and commitment. Every leader faces a time when this must be done. How it is done will leave a lasting mark. To do it well requires grace, inner clarity, the willingness to act decisively and a strong sense of compassion.

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