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A Mentee's Lament



During our first meeting, Suze, a young nurse leader, appeared grounded, eager, filled with ambition, and clear about her goals. “I want to change the world,” she announced. Her words and demeanor suggested that she is capable of doing just that, but she feels stalled in her current position. She described some of its limitations, and she also lamented the fact that she has no mentors.

Suze holds a regional-level service line post in a large healthcare entity. She enjoys considerable support among her contemporaries, and her written evaluations are outstanding. All the data indicate that Suze is a star. Many of her colleagues believe she is capable of advancing to her organization's highest levels.

Although Suze holds an executive position in a critical functional area, she does not have organizational experience outside the regional office. Her immediate superior, Norma, brought Suze into the organization 5 years ago, and she has guided Suze's steady rise to prominence. Norma is a brilliant strategist and communicator, according to Suze, but she is also abrasive, difficult, impatient, and not well liked. People are afraid of her. Suze portrays their relationship as “Suze, good cop” and “Norma, bad cop.”

Although it is clear that Suze admires and is grateful to Norma, it is also clear that she is ready to move. Even though Norma has served as a functional mentor to Suze, like many mentees, Suze does not and has not ever seen Norma in this light.

Suze has many job options in her organization. When she discusses these with Norma, Norma informs her of the negative consequences of each choice. In every opportunity, Norma finds a significant problem. As we talk further, a pattern emerges: Norma doesn't like any prospect that is beyond her own span of control and influence. Suze is aware that “leaving” Norma will be difficult. She realizes that Norma may experience her wish to move on as disloyal and “punish” her in some way.

Stepping back from the details, we see in Suze an outstanding young leader who has reached a turning point in her career and in her relationship with her supervisor. This part of Suze's journey is one that many of us experience: where once we were indebted to and enthralled with

our supervisor or informal “mentor's” ways, those same qualities begin to chafe, even if just a bit. It's not that what we have learned is not useful, it is that we are ready to go beyond it.

Suze's dilemma reveals insights into both mentor and mentee challenges when their most significant learning is behind them rather than before them. In this case, mentor Norma's actions may be motivated by fear, whether it is conscious or unconscious. Perhaps Norma believes that Suze's departure will render her less effective. Perhaps she is concerned about what it will look like if a star “leaves her.” Perhaps Norma is aware that if her poor behavior is exposed, her own career could stall.

At the same time, Suze is experiencing new facets of herself as a leader. She has reached the limits of her ability to grow and learn from her mentor, yet she still values her mentor's brilliance and contribution. Suze may be afraid that she, too, will be less effective; what if she is not as successful without the guidance and protection of her boss? What does Suze do now?

- First, she must realize that the responsibility for her growth as a leader ultimately rests with her, not her mentor.
- She can recognize that the relationship with her supervisor *must* change if she is to continue to develop and learn.
- She can acknowledge that implementing this change will require considerable personal courage.
- She can show compassion for herself. Leaving the familiarity of a relationship with a significant mentor and entering into the unknown is challenging for anyone, especially a young leader who is venturing beyond a powerful force like Norma.
- She can accept that making this change will alter the form and depth of the relationship with Norma, but it need not signal its end.

Wise mentees consciously consider what they have learned from their mentors and whether and how they want to continue to relate to them. Even if a continuing relationship is not possible or desirable, the mentee can still let her mentor know the ways in which their relationship has been especially valuable.

If you relate more to the mentor's side of this story, here are some questions you can consider:

1. When a mentee or a favorite direct report is ready for challenges that are beyond what you can offer, how do you react?
2. Do a strict and scrupulously honest personal accounting of how you relate to your mentee now. If he or she has excelled within your area but would benefit from moving outside it, are you doing all you can to help and support the mentee so they can do that?
3. If you feel a sense of vulnerability when a trusted lieutenant is about to leave, what steps can you take to address your personal needs? How can you increase your safety while lessening your unintended dependence on your mentee?
4. If you find yourself actively or passively deflecting a star's efforts to grow in new directions, what will it take for you to move past your resistance so you can offer your blessing and help?

5. If you believe he or she is about to make a mistake, can you give your mentee the benefit of your viewpoint while also letting her know that you still support her?

Suze took her many options and the lessons of her mentor/mentee relationship to heart. She created criteria and ultimately selected a job that will give her needed experience in leading a key process redesign effort in a local acute care facility for 6 months. She can then return to her regional position if she wishes. Initially, Norma did not approve of this move, but Suze stood her ground. When Norma saw that Suze was proceeding anyway, she reframed Suze's decision and declared that she would "detail" Suze to do this same work in all of her facilities when Suze returns. Suze does not want to do this, and she is prepared to say no to Norma when that time comes.

As Suze prepares for her new role, she goes with Norma's blessing. Suze

is leaving to deepen her experience and pursue her dream of changing the world. By moving courageously toward this new choice, Suze added a critical dimension to her personal power. Despite her supervisor's resistance, she devised a careful process for reviewing her options, deciding what to do, and where to do it. She also decided what guidance to take with her and what guidance to leave behind.

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