

## DILEMMAS

# Need a mentor? Best to find your own



**SUSAN PINKER**  
PROBLEM SOLVING

## Dear Susan:

I am in my first year as manager of the technical division of an international company. Although I have had plenty of management experience, I feel somewhat out of my depth as I'm new to this environment and one of just a few women. I think it would be a good idea to have a mentor in the company, but there are few women around to choose from. Should I just ask senior management to suggest someone from the company mentorship program? Does it matter if the mentor is male?

-- Going Fishing

## Dear Fishing,

Are the relationships you pick for yourself better than the ones others pick for you? That's what you're asking, and when it comes to mentors, anyway, the answer is yes. Informal mentorships that the participants arrange themselves win the bet hands down.

Research by Belle Rose Ragins at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and her colleague John Cotton at Marquette University compared the experiences of 609 protégés. Those with informal mentors ended up with far more benefits: more psychological support, more pay, more career development, and more satisfaction than those in formal mentoring programs (some studies report more promotions accruing to these informal protégés, too).

All these advantages are extended over a longer period, as informal

mentoring relationships usually last between three and six years, whereas formal ones organized by the employer are often bound by contract and last between a month and a year.

The formal ones are very popular -- one website, <http://www.mentors.ca>, lists 126 pages of mentorship programs. Yet, even if a third to a half of North American corporations offer them, the efficacy of formal mentoring programs is hit and miss. They're like the success of arranged marriages. When other people choose your partner for you and legislate how you should interact, you have to be lucky to find the chemistry that makes it more than a chore.

As Prof. Ragins says, people who volunteer for those programs often do it because they want recognition as good corporate citizens, not because they are inspiring models or great communicators. It's better if you shop around for a mentor who is the best match for you.

Indeed, you'd think that we'd respond and learn from people most like ourselves, so your reflex to find a female mentor seems plausible. But it's not a foregone conclusion that same-sex mentors are better, and this assumption can even backfire.

Here's what recent studies say:

Protégés with a history of male mentors earn significantly more than those with a history of female mentors.

Female protégés with male mentors had more promotions than their male counterparts.

Female protégés with female mentors had no more psychological support than those with male mentors (but women socialized more with each other after work).

Female protégés received more counselling and coaching from informal mentors, males received more from formal mentors.

Women think they'll find it harder to find a mentor than men, but are equally likely to find one.

Women with male and female mentors reported similar experiences, but women with female mentors were more likely to want to quit their jobs afterwards. (Female mentors may have been more candid about their dissatisfaction with their careers, or the protégé may have witnessed a hard-driving, mid-career woman with no husband, children or leisure time and thought, no thanks.)

A male mentor might be easier to find in your workplace and there's clearly no downside. Choose someone based on what you want to learn and don't restrict yourself to the company's formal program. Approaching a colleague -- male or female -- as a possible mentor is no different than communicating about any work-related project. Be forthright about what you're looking for and why you think he or she might be able to advise you. Give them ample time to consider the possibility before you follow up with a plan.

Interviews I have conducted would back up the research. Indeed, people tended to become wistful when recalling their mentors. They found that individual arrangements work the best -- and a mentor who has stepped forward and hand-picked a protégé gets the most points in the nostalgia department.

Montreal emergency room physician Kashif Pirzada had two senior physicians, one male, one female, who guided him and offered him advice early in his training. "They just selected themselves -- it just happened," he recalled.

Huntley Addie, a 40-year-old high school teacher in Montreal has been mentored by Brian Potter, a teacher 20 years his senior, over the past 10 years. "Brian chose me. That's how I was

honoured," Mr. Addie said. "He taught me to listen. He's like the breath you need to take when you're angry. If I could be this kind of person to anyone in the future, I'd be a success."

There's your answer: Choose your own mentor now, and remember to pick your own protégé later...

**Dear Susan:**

As an executive who often travels overseas, I am finding it more difficult to manage my sleep schedule as I get older. I often have morning meetings after an overnight flight, and, although I try to sleep on board, I don't always succeed. Also, the plane is a great place to catch up on e-mails and paperwork. How do I solve this problem, when it is not only my schedule but the staff across the Atlantic that is involved?

-- Asleep at the Wheel

**Dear Asleep,**

We used to think that people who could hold their liquor -- even working or driving

while completely sodden -- were heroes. Those days are over, but the era of working while sleep-deprived has replaced them, and the danger to life and limb is just as great, according to Charles Czeisler, the Baldino Professor of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School.

Half of North Americans say they often feel fatigued during the day, and 17 per cent say they feel this way every day, according to a 2005 poll by the National Sleep Foundation (<http://www.sleepfoundation.org>). Pulling an all-nighter to make a deadline is considered a badge of honour (some unnamed people are guilty of this dubious accolade in my house). When a colleague who read a draft of my book chapter on an airplane e-mailed that he was "engrossed until I fell asleep," I wasn't offended. I knew he was just bone tired.

The corporate insouciance about sleep deprivation has to change, Mr. Czeisler writes in this month's Harvard Business Review, and if it doesn't, the cascading effects include more car and airplane accidents, bad decisions, misplaced anger at the office and more obesity (lack of sleep makes people crave carbohydrates and

sugars, which in turn contribute to sleep problems).

Mr. Czeisler advocates that companies address sleep deprivation in their corporate policies, exactly the way they deal with drugs, smoking or sexual harassment -- by outlining their expectations and educating their work force about adverse consequences.

On an individual level, If you can't avoid red-eye flights completely, then at least arrange a lift to meet you when you arrive and schedule a half day off before any meetings so you don't shame yourself by nodding off in the boardroom. If you're an executive, you can start changing the status quo by stipulating your schedule before you travel.

Virginia Woolf may have called sleep "that deplorable curtailment of the joy of life," but anyone who has done without it for 24 hours might beg to differ.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.*  
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