

Mastering Mentoring 6 Surviving Let Downs

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



In any kind of relationship, there are going to be times when one party is disappointed with the other. That is just human nature. Even in the most supportive mentor relationship not everything is going to be positive and happy all the time. You need to anticipate that there will be times of angst and have a recovery plan in mind.

The recovery action will depend on which party let the other down and the genesis of the fault. Here are some common problems that come up in mentor relationships.

One party has to cancel a discussion at the last minute

In the hub-bub of everyday organizational life, unexpected things are going to come up. The protégé may have an emergency at home and be unable to attend a scheduled meeting. The Mentor may have a crisis at the office and need to cancel a discussion at the last minute.

This kind of thing is inevitable, and the repair is to forgive and forget. If the last minute cancellations become a pattern or habit, then it is necessary to adjust the relationship accordingly. Have a chat with the other person and see if there is a way to make scheduled interfaces more robust.

One party fails to do preparatory work that was promised

If there was a promise that one person would get some material ready prior to the next interface and it does not happen, then there is an obvious let down. It could be caused by a temporary lapse, but you should look into what happened because it might be that the errant person is losing interest in the relationship.

It could also could be a pattern (having nothing to do with the mentor) that could impact the person's career. The mentor should have a conversation about the root cause and stress that part of developing trust with other people is being prepared.

Have a discussion on the issue before it repeats. Ask if there is still high value in the mentor relationship, or if perhaps it is time for a hiatus.

One party is being duplicitous

One party may be all smiles and positive with comments when the other person is around, but is somehow undermining that person when in discussions with other people. This is a trust violation that must be confronted immediately upon detection. Do not procrastinate; this problem needs to be addressed immediately.

If the other party is having a problem in this area, you may not be aware of it for a while, but eventually some information will leak back to you. Keep in mind that the violation may simply be in the body language of the other person. If he or she simply gives a smirk or shrug when your name comes up, that is a major problem that needs to be addressed.

The relationship has become a burden

This can happen in small steps over time. Any one step is insignificant, but put together in a pattern, and it is time to refresh the underlying basis for the relationship. Have a frank discussion with the other person about what is happening. Body language is particularly useful when trying to pick up on a lowering of the tolerance for investing time with the other person.

You might say something like, “You don’t seem as energized with our weekly discussions as you were a few months ago. Am I becoming a burden to you?” Investigate the source of lower dedication and see if a change in pattern or something will help bring back the good feelings.

The problem could also be a temporary high stress situation caused by work or non-work demands.

One thing that really helps

In any mentoring relationship, if both parties frequently express their pleasure and gratitude for what is happening, it will help to sustain the good will. Be careful not to overdo the feedback with too much drippy praise, but do express your thankfulness to the other person. Remember, that in a good mentor relationship both parties are gaining by the activities.

It is good to verbalize how you are benefiting by the relationship from time to time. Just don’t go overboard with the praise.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online, Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind, and Trust in Transition:

The
TRUST
Ambassador

Navigating Organizational Change. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.