

THE DARK SIDE OF MENTORING

Ron is Joan's informal mentor. Joan has been hesitant over whether to accept a certain assignment, one that would redefine aspects of her position. Ron says that it would be a great career opportunity and that her reluctance is borne from inappropriate self-doubt and not something to act on. He convinces her to take it on. Later, when she flounders and is overwhelmed and turns to him, Ron argues -- persuasively -- that he should stay out of it and that she needs to learn how to do this on her own. Joan is confused -- about herself, about Ron, about the task. And so are we. Is Ron genuine or politically/psychologically motivated? Is he accurate or misguided? And what about Joan? Is she self-assessing accurately or out of fear? What are the psychological consequences for Joan if Ron has a hidden agenda in talking her out of her feelings?

This example reflects some of the issues open to interpretation within a mentoring relationship. At first glance, what could be better than having the apparent freedom to choose one's own mentor in a reciprocal arrangement? As we shall see, however, there are hazards along the way, the most notable of which we will label "theoretical abuse."

An informal mentor would seem to have less power over a protégé than a supervisor because the latter has control over the flow of resources, the assignment of tasks, and the assessment process. But, as shown in the example, the informal mentor wields an influence. And the mutual choice to engage in a mentoring relationship is often underlain with strong psychological forces that leave the protégé extremely vulnerable. Further, the non-hierarchical professional basis of the relationship coupled with these forces gives the informal mentor enhanced power in the arena of information. In this essay, I will attempt to explore the misuse of that power and the subsequent consequences for the protégé. First, I want to discuss some general aspects of power and its abuse.

ABUSE OF POWER AND THEORETICAL ABUSE

Power can be defined as the capacity for one social unit, e.g. a leader, to determine the behavior of another, e.g. followers. A *type* of power is defined by its source, its context, venue, and leader responsibility with respect to it. For example, in an organization, "reward power" is based on control over physical and financial resources in the context of allocation and compensation processes.

An informal mentor in an organization gains power through control over one critical aspect: s/he holds the key to understanding politics and culture. The mentor typically enacts this through the activities of advice-giving (guidance), informing (information), and interpreting (assessment of protégé progress in

general and within their relationship in particular as well as attributions for protégé performance decrements, should any exist).

Abusing a power has been defined in general as acting so as to further one's own ends at the expense of followers. So, taking credit away from a worthy protégé's successful completion of a task would be an abuse of power. And saddling a protégé with a task designed not for his or her growth, but rather primarily for the benefit of the mentor would be an abuse of power. Thus, abusive mentoring contains elements of manipulation, intentional or inadvertent, overt or covert. This is in distinction to ineffective, e.g., misguided mentoring, or dysfunction, e.g., misanthropic, mentoring.

Mentor manipulation of his or her influence sphere, namely the realm of information, for his or her gain is called *theoretical abuse*. It occurs in a variety of contexts. For example, suppose the mentor wants something done without calling attention to him/herself and gets the protégé to step in. Such an action might be considered an abuse of power, but it is only theoretical abuse when the mentor uses his or her influence to convince the protégé that it's in the latter's best interest when it really serves the mentor. This might be the case in our introductory example.

Protégés are sitting ducks for this kind of abuse – and this abuse has an additional component to it. Whereas they can be readily manipulated, misled, and marginalized, they typically at least know that they've been had. With theoretical abuse, however, a protégé is just as likely to take it with a smile, never seeing it for what it is and feeling grateful for the mentor's "support" even while their own views are trampled on.

More fully, theoretical abuse, designed to exploit the protégé to serve the mentor's needs, manifests itself in the failure to elicit, explore, and elucidate protégé meaning-making. Even if the mentor is well-meaning, he or she is still engaging in theoretical abuse if he or she does not actively help the protégé grow as a meaning-maker. This may be a "softer" form of abuse, but fundamentally, the mentor's ultimate responsibility is to put the protégé in a position of independence with respect to understanding the culture and to generating a network of his or her own.

Protégé vulnerability to informal mentor influence attempts and theoretical abuse

I gave early indication that informal mentoring puts even more power in the hands of the mentor while simultaneously leaving the protégé more vulnerable to any influence attempts. This would seem counter intuitive. After all, each

party chooses the other and the slate is presumably clear of the apparent political muddle accompanying supervisory mentoring. Let us first take a closer look at some of the “bonds of attraction” – the forces that draw the mentor and protégé together in an informal mentoring arrangement.

First, there is a professional component. Perhaps the mentor is ready to shepherd someone through the growth process; he or she is looking for community outreach, is ready to give back, and wants a connection with an eager, younger person. On the other hand, the protégé is looking for someone with expertise and experience, for someone trustworthy, someone he or she knows and would like to work with as a teacher and leader. Some happenstance or chemistry draws the two together. Perhaps their styles are compatible – similar or complementary. They feed off each other’s energy. The protégé in particular just wants to be in the presence of the mentor and also wants the mentor to think well of him or her.

There is also a second component we might call psychological. It reflects both parties’ emotional issues from the past that drive some of their present behaviors and longings. Any unresolved need, hurt, anger, or fear, any old scripts or patterns find ways to imprint themselves on today’s events and relationships. A protégé, for example, may unconsciously set a mentor up on a surrogate parent pedestal, driven to please him or her at all costs, embellishing him or her with sweeping powers, and hoping for an oceanic kind of love to make up for that missing in childhood.

Concealed contributors to protégé vulnerability to mentor influence attempts

Vulnerability is enhanced by: protégé psychological needs; mentor persuasive communication skills; mentor concealment of his or her agendas; and the ultimate “unprovability” of mentor motivation within the relationship. Going back to our lead example, how will we know if Ron is being a good shepherd and really thinking of Joan or rather using her to get something done with which he would prefer not to be associated? If Ron is convincing and good at concealing, even objective outside observers may have trouble penetrating his motives.

In general, one can conceive of a motivation continuum for the mentor from community minded individuals ready to give back by helping others and learning in the process to people who using younger members of the organization for either political gain or psychological “acting out.” Knowing where a mentor sits on this continuum can be difficult, as noted. If the mentor happens to be charismatic, at least to the protégé, he or she is assumed to be community-minded, i.e. pure in spirit, ; eager to follow his or her lead.

Three scenarios

The Ron-Joan case reveals three fundamental arenas for mentor action, incorporating meaning-making and subsequent influence attempts – complementing the macro role of acculturating the protégé. The mentor has the responsibility of alerting the protégé to (1) opportunities, e.g. assignments coming from informal networks; (2) resources, including mentor coaching; (3) and feedback, i.e. assessment. The mentor's meaning-making and influence attempts take the form of recommendations, evaluations, and attributions.

Again, his or her motivation in doing so may be pure or tainted; in the latter case, influence attempts will likely be abusive and in particular, theoretically abusive. Again, theoretical abuse of the softer kind persists when the mentor does not necessarily push his or her message, but discourages – or fails to encourage – protégés from expressing theirs.

Responses to influence attempts

In general, there are three basic protégé responses to a mentor influence attempt. The ensuing dialog may contain theoretical abuse or it may not. Mentor motivation is unknown and trying to persuade is not inherently abusive! Theoretical abuse occurs when the mentor attempts to satisfy a need at the expense of the protégé through imposing a point of view or through failing to elicit and explore the protégé's view, which we will assume differs, at least initially, from the mentor's. In any case, in response, the protégé can *contest*, *comply*, or *collude*.

Contesting entails taking issue with the mentor's meaning-making or with his or her persuasion attempt. It requires the protégé to be aware of a schism in thinking and to be aware that the mentor may be trying to impose a point of view. For a protégé to contest, he or she must be sufficiently competent and strong to take on a mentor as an equal. The protégé in this instance attempts to force the mentor to engage in a process, one that the latter may not agree to. If that happens, the protégé is likely to go underground and back away from the relationship. With informal mentoring, this can lead to dissolution of the relationship.

Complying generally assumes that the protégé has an initial point of view different from the mentor's, but then comes to agree with it. In other words, the mentor is persuasive. The protégé may also realign his or her point of view in recognition of the mentor's superior knowledge and experience. Sometimes this

can take place without a process at all: a mentor behavior may speak volumes to the protégé, who then abandons a perspective. The protégé may be reluctant to drop his or her thinking or the protégé may quickly embrace the mentor's ideas. In any case, the protégé is aware of (1) the initial difference and (2) the persuasion attempt.

Colluding is the most insidious way in which a protégé's meaning-making can be undermined, especially by theoretical abuse. In this case, a protégé defers to a mentor's meaning-making without even any awareness of so doing. It becomes automatic to adopt the mentor's meaning-making; it happens so quickly that the protégé is unaware of having had an initial point of view. The deference reflects a complete and instantaneous abdication of oneself as an independent person capable of forging a view of reality separate from the mentor's. The mentor is always right. Sometimes, the colluding protégé supplies his or her own meanings as those that justify the mentor's actions, without the mentor even needing to say a word. This is the case for many protégés when the mentor is charismatic.

Forces Affecting the Response

What drives a protégé toward one of these responses? There is one universal "protectant" but also powerful forces specific to informal mentoring that push the protégé to compliance and collusion.

The organizational scholar Chris Argyris points out that protecting a vulnerable protégé from a threatening mentor – in this case in threat inhering in the power to influence – is a set of instinctive learned behaviors and values, loosely coupled under the label of Model I theory in use. The values include winning, maintaining control, unilateral face-saving, and appearing rational. The strategies include concealing sensitive thoughts and feelings, advocating without illustration, and evaluating without testing, privately blaming others when problems arise. All of this is subsumed under the heading of "that's human nature": that is, it won't change.

Argyris' thesis is that this "dance" is so commonplace that organizational actors expect one another to be so engaged whenever they perceive any sort of incipient conflict. This can negate some of the mentor's influence and claim to meaning-making superiority – since it levels everyone. Everyone is doing the dance, no one discusses it, everyone pretends not to be doing it, and everyone knows it's all happening. At least this predisposes a protégé to recognize influence attempts, to be suspicious about their motivation, and certainly to privately resist them while possibly publicly going along. So this is a force toward a protégé's contesting theoretical abuse, at least privately.

Before discussing consequences, we develop a framework to understand which of the other competing forces will most heavily influence protégé responses. We focus on the strength of the psychological dimension (as indicated, referring to the protégé's latent and unresolved emotional issues) and the strength of the professional/interpersonal dimension (referring specifically in this context to the mentor's power of persuasion). In the case of theoretical abuse, protégé response and subsequent well-being are largely determined by the interaction of the strength of these two forces.

The following grid delimits four basic protégé positions, reflecting those interactions. The rows represent the psychological and the column the interpersonal, each with 2 values, minimal and strong.

<i>Interpersonal/psychological</i>	Persuasive power minimal	Persuasive power strong
Present-based (clarity; minimal)	Contest	Comply
Past-based (hooked in; strong)	Contest or comply	Collude

In the first cell (position), the top left, both forces are relatively weak; the protégé essentially sees the mentor clearly in the present, is not at the mercy of powerful old feelings, and the mentor persuasiveness is not all that compelling. Such a protégé is most likely to contest theoretical abuse and also to terminate the relationship should the mentor dig in his or her heels in response.

If the psychological dimension is strong and mentor persuasive power minimal, either contesting or complying are likely protégé responses. Should the protégé contest because he or she is not persuaded to buy in, the underlying emotional issues will make it hard for him or her to let go of the struggle – of trying to convince the mentor about what is going on. Should the emotional issues become overwhelming and oriented toward giving away empowerment, compliance is also possible, because every mentor can take on the mantle of guru by appealing to the expertise and experience advantage. In the most extreme cases, collusion remains a slight possibility as well.

If the psychological dimension is weak, but persuasive power strong, compliance is the most likely, with some possibility of contesting. The protégé will not think less of him or herself, but will acknowledge the mentor's apparent interpretive superiority and generally go along, finding the persuasive attempt that compelling.

The position of real concern in our analysis is the one in which both dimensions are strong. Then collusion is highly likely as the protégé not only falls prey to the power of the emotional issues, but simultaneously empowers the mentor. The interaction between the two dimensions predisposes the protégé to see the mentor as a surrogate parent who can do no wrong, someone the protégé wants desperately to please and believe. In this case, the attraction is so strong as to function without even the mentor making persuasion attempts. The protégé will anticipate the mentor's "best case" explanations, often exempting him or her from any scrutiny.

Psychological consequences

In general, the colluding protégé is particularly vulnerable to (strong) mentor influence and thus to theoretical abuse attempts. In addition, if this abuse is concealed as well as the mentor needs it serves, the protégé picks up any incipient mentor self-doubt quelled by the successful influence attempt. This dynamic takes place outside either party's awareness – it is as if the protégé is left holding the (mentor psychological) baggage.

When, as a result of this dynamic, the protégé fails to produce outcomes expected of him or her (by either party), collusion wreaks psychological havoc. The psychologically "anorexic" protégé may assume that he or she has failed without the mentor saying anything or even with the mentor's disagreeing! When the mentor does blame, even slightly, the colluding protégé again finds ways to bolster this assertion, rather than fighting back, as would be the case without strong psychological and interpersonal forces.

Returning to the original example, the crux of the matter is the lack of transparency of mentor motivation. There is, however, a way that a protégé can walk away intact no matter how charismatic the mentor and how well concealed his or her agenda. That is simply to look inside and take note: am I beating myself up, do I feel out of control? Am I better off now than I was before, i.e. am I thriving?). By finding a neutral third party with whom to process aspects of the relationship, the protégé may glean a clearer sense of where the mentor is coming from, and then choose to stay with the relationship or to walk away, relatively unscathed.