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## WHEN ROMANCE AFFECTS MENTORING

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Is the chemistry between you and your mentor getting a little too hot? We give you practical advice about what to do in this tricky situation

A relationship between a mentor and a mentee is a close one and a certain degree of platonic “chemistry”, a good connection, is what makes the relationship work. That is after all how the two of you can be comfortable with each other, especially in sharing work experience and transferring skills.

But what do you do when that chemistry gets a little too hot to handle?

Some may tell you to call it quits there and then. But you must have had a great deal of respect for your mentor to have approached them in the first place and it’s a pity to end things on such a negative note without talking the matter over with them.

While it’s normal for a mentor and mentee to occasionally give each other a casual pat on the shoulder or a hug now and then, there are certain behaviours that may raise a red flag.

Executive coach Penny Holburn says that a mentor (or mentee) flirting or asking you out on what seems like a date are signs of trouble to come.

“The person may be making sexual innuendos and/or touching you in a way that is inappropriate or that they would not be comfortable doing in front of others,” says Holburn.

Founder of and executive coach at E-SCC Dynamic Consulting, Evelyn Masotja, says a mentor is a person of authority and as such, should always ensure that the mentoring relationship remains professional.

“Sometimes people become close, but a mentee and a mentor need to guard against that. As a mentor you need to protect the integrity of the mentee. You’ve got power because the mentee looks up to you,” she says.

“Have values and respect boundaries. Normally mentorship is about goals and learning from someone who has walked the path. The relationship should be guided by a particular framework. There could be personal things discussed, but as a person of authority a mentor should stay within bounds of professionalism,” says Masotja.

“There are always rules, even if the mentoring relationship is not a formal one,” says Holburn.

“If the relationship was formed simply by a mentee picking a mentor [outside of a formal programme], end the relationship and find another mentor,” advises Holburn.

But if a mentee and their mentor were introduced via a formal structure, such as a mentorship programme, it’s best to raise the matter of the crossed boundaries with the organisation handling the programme.

“If a mentor hits on you, you can report the person to an institution they subscribe to, or are affiliated with. Alert the institution. They can either reprimand or alert others to this mentor’s behaviour,” says Masotja.

“Highlight that the relationship is about mentorship and set boundaries. If the mentor does not adhere to these boundaries, set the record straight and just sever ties,” she says.

But what if the mentor and mentee realise they have mutual romantic feelings for each other?

Holburn says if a mentor and mentee do get involved, the relationship will never be completely equal because the mentor is usually in the more powerful position.

“You can’t be sexually involved with your mentor because that person may challenge you in a way you can’t allow your sexual partner to,” says Holburn “If you want to get romantically involved with a mentor, it’s best to get another mentor.”

“There’s an issue of objectivity, everything will be compromised and is no longer about mentorship,” says Masotja.

She explains that the rules will be relaxed and attention will not be paid to details. Masotja says once a mentor and mentee become involved, a mentor may no longer feel free to tell the mentee the truth about any professional shortcomings out of fear that it will affect their sexual relationship.

But just as mentors can hit on mentees, the roles can be reversed with a mentee hitting on their mentor. Holburn says this is quite common in blue-chip companies as subordinates look for quick ways to climb the corporate ladder.

“You do become better known and often one’s advancement depends on who you know in those companies,” she says, but adds that it’s risky behaviour.

Masotja warns that at the end of the day whether a mentee does get involved with their mentor or not is related to that person’s boundaries and what they can both cope with without compromising their standards and ethics.

“Developmental areas should not be compromised. There is a risk that the relationship will not work out. It can get messy, but it depends on the level of maturity of the parties,” she concludes.