

Participants: Please find your assigned table, introduce yourself, and then read this scenario. After everyone at your table has finished their review, please discuss the questions below among yourselves. Later in the session, each group will be asked to share some of its insights. **Requests:** Make sure each person at your table gets more or less equal “air time”; ask someone to take notes and ask a second person to serve as the spokesperson for the group.

Scenario: A Glimpse of a Mentoring Relationship in its Third Year

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Participants: After reading the Discussion Scenario, please respond to these questions:

1. **What Good Practices (at the individual and organizational levels) do you see or can you infer?**
2. **What Bad Practices and Dysfunctions do you see or can you infer?**
3. **What Pro-Active Steps (by Joe, Torrey, and others) would resolve or at least diminish the dysfunctions? Be specific about words, actions, etc. By whom, what, how, when?**
4. **If *you* yourself were an exceptionally competent mentor and a full professor, how would *you* propose to help Torrey? What precautions should be taken? Please be specific.**
5. **What new self-help strategies should Torrey be adopting for the next few years? How could *you* as the exceptionally competent mentor assist her in activating those self-help strategies?**

Here is a conversation between an assigned, internal mentor and his mentee. Both are in the same large engineering department at a public university. The mentor (Joe) is a full professor and has European-American ancestry. The mentee (Torrey) is assistant professor (3rd year) with African-American ancestry.

1 **Mentor:** Good to see you, Torrey. By the way, thanks for the article you sent me. It really
2 helped. One of my hunches, that I generated last week with my research team, seems to taking
3 shape nicely. That paper you shared with me goes directly to that hunch.

4 **Mentee:** Glad to hear that, Joe. Glad to hear the article is relevant. You know, I’m pleased that
5 every so often I can be helpful to *you*. I got a lucky break when the dean assigned you as my
6 mentor.

7 **Mentor:** Hey, thanks for saying that. Okay, let’s get down to business. Listen, I’ve had a chance
8 to review your grant proposal. Of course, I have some criticisms. After three years here as my
9 mentee, I’m sure you’re accustomed to my hard-nosed approach. I don’t mince my words.

10 **Mentee:** Yes, your suggestions have always proven valuable. and I’m always grateful. And, yes,
11 I’ve had to learn to brace myself for your delivery of them. Okay, I think I’m ready. At least I
12 hope so.

13 **Mentor:** Well...in this proposal you offer a very weak rationale for what you want to do.
14 You’re vague—that’s deadly. You’re unconvincing. You can and must do much better. You
15 won’t be able to sell this to any peer review committee. I surely wouldn’t fund this!

16 **Mentee:** Wow. That’s blunt. And I hear you. Guess I’ll have to go back to the drawing board.
17 What did you think of the details about how I’d execute the project?

18 **Mentor:** Oh, they’re fine. Fine. But I think it’s a waste of time for me to get into them. Your
19 proposal has some strengths but my dwelling on those won’t really help you. It’s a waste of my
20 time and yours to focus on the strengths. That’s not what you need.

21 **Mentee:** Well, I’ll revisit the rationale section. Would you be willing to look at that section again
22 after the revisions?

23 **Mentor:** Sure. Sure. Happy to do it.

24 **Mentee:** Well, on another matter... Well, this is a bit awkward. Umm. Do you remember that
25 workshop we participated in last spring, for mentors and mentees? Do you remember the part
26 where the associate dean focused on “critical incidents” and encouraged mentees to share with
27 their mentors when they are experiencing intense confusion or slights or whatever. You know,
28 the mentees were urged to bring things up to their mentors that might be in the category of a
29 serious threat to their career advancement or to their professional well-being or both.

30 **Mentor:** Yes, of course I remember. At the time I was thinking to myself ‘gee, as a junior
31 faculty member I would have quit my post before I would have ever disclosed something
32 embarrassing or seriously confusing to a senior person. Too bad I never got even close to a
33 candid conversation-- I surely needed extra support and help, a few times, so I could see more
34 options for myself.’

35 **Mentee:** Well, I’m glad to hear you say this and glad you feel this way. Because I’ve just
36 bumped into a situation that I want to run by you.

37 **Mentor:** Okay, let’s hear it.

38 **Mentee:** Well, last week in the meeting of the engineering college’s curriculum committee, all of
39 us were going along pretty well. Then Professor Smith said something that I found really
40 shocking...and I couldn’t believe that nobody objected or tried to defend me.

41 **Mentor:** Oh, no. Not Smithy again. He can be a pain and an aggravation. What happened? What
42 did Smithy say?

43 **Mentee:** Well, in our committee discussion, I brought up that we didn’t have even *one* ‘history
44 of science and engineering course’ on the books. I then began to give reasons why a few such
45 courses would strengthen our departmental offerings. After maybe three minutes, Professor
46 Smith interrupted me in mid-sentence and said ‘Well, Torrey, please allow me to remind you that
47 you are our *diversity hire*. You were brought here through the generosity and political
48 correctness of our beloved provost. Surely you’re not proposing that *you* would teach any part of
49 such a course.’

50 **Mentor:** Oh my gosh. Unbelievable. That’s vintage Smithy for you...shooting off his big mouth
51 and trying to be funny. He can be outrageous sometimes, but don’t worry. Nobody pays much
52 attention to him.

53 **Mentee:** Well, Joe, I’ve tried not to worry about it, but it’s impossible for me to ignore what
54 happened. It certainly wasn’t funny or trivial from my point of view. He belittled me--and in
55 front of five senior colleagues and one other junior person on the committee. The committee
56 chair did seem embarrassed and did turn very red in the face, but he said absolutely *nothing*. Not
57 a word.

58 **Mentor:** That’s bad. I cannot fathom why the chair froze up. That is really puzzling. I mean, all
59 of us have seen Smithy in action. He has to be quickly contained.

60 **Mentee:** Well, the icy silence in the room went on and on. Finally, the chair said something to
61 the effect of ‘Hey, let’s take a coffee break for 15 minutes and then get back to our agenda.’ I
62 myself was stunned for the rest of the meeting and had ringing in my ears. And I still keep going

63 over and over this episode in my mind. It's like a very bad dream that's become stuck on the
64 'repeat' mode.

65 **Mentor:** Look. I don't doubt that Smithy would say something like that. But honestly, Torrey,
66 you'll have to grow a thicker skin. He's just teasing you. I mean, he's *not* a bigot. We don't have
67 any bigots in this department—we never have, I'm proud to say. So I'd recommend that you just
68 put this little episode behind you. And just avoid Smithy from now on.

69 **Mentee:** What I'm wondering is this: if his behavior keeps up, isn't there something more that I
70 should do? Or the department chair? Smith can do me real harm at tenure time and at various
71 places along the way.

72 **Mentor:** Well, every one of us has enemies. No one is immune. This is just part of being in
73 academe. The academic domain can be nasty at times, but one shouldn't take it personally.

74 **Mentee:** The thing is... I'm the *only* African American faculty member in the department--and,
75 for that matter, in the whole college. In fact, there are only a handful of U.S. domestic minority
76 faculty at this *entire* university. Yes, I know the campus is very proud of its *global* diversity—we
77 have a number of international and immigrant faculty from South America, Asia, the Caribbean,
78 Africa, India, and on and on. But why does domestic diversity always get shortchanged? Why
79 are those so few of us?

80 **Mentor:** The university is rightfully proud of the global range of its faculty. What's wrong with
81 that?

82 **Mentee:** Well, it's important to understand that the campus has only a *handful* of homegrown
83 U.S. minorities like me. This should be troubling. My people were instrumental in building this
84 country, both as slaves and as free citizens. They've been in this country for generations and
85 generations. I mean, I resent being treated as a second-class or worse!

86 **Mentor:** Look, Torrey, calm down, please. Calm down. This is a very minor episode. Don't
87 blow it out of proportion.

88 **Mentee:** It doesn't feel minor to me. And I don't see how I'm blowing it out of proportion.
89 There's more. Not one member of the curriculum committee has sought me out, to see how I feel
90 about what Professor Smith said. Not one person has checked in with me.

91 **Mentor:** Yes, that too is puzzling. Torrey, listen: I want to say that this is regrettable and that
92 I'm sorry it happened.

93 **Mentee:** Thanks, Joe. I really appreciate your saying that. Just being able to talk with you about
94 it--you need to know that I'm already feeling some relief. And I think the tape playing in my
95 head is getting a bit fainter.

96 **Mentor:** Good. Very good. But before we go any further, I need to tell you something. I have to
97 admit that I'm uncomfortable with all this talk about race and ethnicity. We've never talked
98 much about my 'ancestral roots' or about yours. That's surely as it should be. My philosophy is
99 to be truly color-blind in my dealings with people. That is how I try to live my life.

100 **Mentee:** Well, someone with *my* ancestry and my group membership finds it very hard to
101 understand color-blindness—or to believe that anyone can actually do that. Saying it, yes.

102 Members of the majority group often say it. But living it? I don't think anyone can or should do
103 that.

104 **Mentor:** Well, Torrey, I should clarify. What I mean is that I try to treat everyone the same.
105 Here, let me give you an example. I have three mentees: two males and you. I try to treat all of
106 you the exact same way and not play favorites. That's the only fair way to proceed.

107 **Mentee:** Well, I bet the other two mentees are European-American, part of the majority group.
108 You're nodding 'yes.' Okay, so those two wouldn't have to deal with Professor Smith's belittling
109 comments, would they?

110 **Mentor:** Point taken. I guess not.

111 **Mentee:** And how about the example from last year? Would your other mentees have had to deal
112 with those four harassing students: you know, the ones who made it clear they didn't believe that
113 I--a woman and a minority woman, to boot—could possibly be intellectually qualified enough to
114 teach them? I really doubt that your other two mentees bump into awful stereotypes about their
115 gender and group membership.

116 **Mentor:** Okay, agreed. I totally concur.

117 **Mentee:** I mean, they probably benefit from positive stereotypes about their competency. And
118 I'd guess that they're probably viewed as a 'good fit' in the department because they represent
119 the norm. Right? You know, I'd prefer a positive assumption for *everyone* or at least a *neutral*
120 assumption for everyone. That would constitute a level playing field, in my book.

121 **Mentor:** Okay, Torrey, I'm hearing you about the positive bias. I'm remembering that episode
122 last year when you were coping with a handful of smart-alecks in the big lecture class. You and
123 I together went over to the teaching and learning center, to see what ideas they had about solving
124 that problem.

125 **Mentee:** Yes, I really appreciated your coming with me, Joe. And of course the coaching I got at
126 the center and especially from *you* was terrific. I was able to resolve the student problem and re-
127 establish my authority in that class.

128 **Mentor:** Well, that was the first time, I guess, that a light bulb went off in my head about *my*
129 *own* gender and my own group affiliation. You know, that was the first time I began to realize
130 how these things bring me 'unearned benefits' and 'hidden profits' (I think that's what the
131 director of the center called them). By contrast, your gender and group identity all too often bring
132 you the opposite.

133 **Mentee:** Yes, we both saw things in a new light.

134 **Mentor:** That's for sure. Listen, here's what I want to propose at this point. You and I should get
135 some more coffee. And then we should start brainstorming about various ways to handle Smithy
136 and minimize the damage he might cause. I'm with you. I may be slow on the uptake, but I'm
137 ready now! **END.**