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## **ARTICLE** **DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

# When Your Good Mentor Goes Bad

*by Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins*

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According to [a study at Sun Microsystems](#), mentees were promoted five times more often than those without a mentor. Eighty-eight percent of respondents to [a Center for Creative Leadership survey](#) believe that having a mentor is useful for career development. We've all heard the stats. It never hurts to have a few good mentors behind you. But what happens when a good mentor goes bad?

Enter, stage right, Alan — our star protégé. Alan, whom we've coached, is a vice-president at a private equity firm and on track to become a managing director. Unfortunately, his longtime mentor, Roger, has become a potential derailer in the process. You see, Roger rubs many of the other MDs the wrong way and is considered somewhat of a rogue partner. Regrettably for Alan, the partners worry that he has become a Roger “mini-me.” And, who wants two rogue partners running around the firm?

While you may not be in Alan's exact situation, perhaps you realize that your mentoring relationship is not what it used to be. Is your mentor relationship in need of an overhaul? Here are three ways to help kick-start the situation:

**1. Spread your Wings.** It's time to expand beyond the comfort of your mentoring nest. Go forth and build a stronger internal, informal network. Look inside and outside of your function. Who are the critical stakeholders? Reach out to them. Find out how you can be of help. Offer your support. Give

folks an opportunity to get to know you outside of your mentor's sphere. You'll be surprised how quickly the law of reciprocity and goodwill kicks in.

**2. Stand on Your Own.** Show others that you are your own person and not solely defined by your mentor. To change this perception, start generating critical results. If a key metric is sales, close a few sales — on your own. If ideas can gain you some traction, present new ones to the organization — on your own. You get the drift. When you start actively letting your results speak on your behalf (and not just your mentor), it will help others experience you as a leader in your own right.

**3. Speak the Truth.** It's time for a no-holds-barred conversation with your mentor. Exercise your managing-up skills. In their quintessential HBR article "[Managing Your Boss](#)," Jack Gabarro and John Kotter highlight that effective professionals seek the help they need instead of waiting for their bosses to provide it. Same goes for the mentor-mentee relationship. Frame the conversation carefully; tell your mentor, "*What would be most helpful is if you would let me work on this deal on my own...*" While you'll need to be direct with your request, remember that your mentor is a person too. Be appreciative and clear that you are not abandoning him, but simply asking for his help in supporting your leadership development. In the long run, you both stand to benefit from this conversation.

What thoughts do you have on managing mentoring relationships? What suggestions do you have for turning around a mentor relationship gone bad?

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