

What Would You Do?

Here's a dilemma faced by an actual mentor. Read the facts, put yourself in this situation, and choose your preferred solution...or develop your own! Go here to see how your solution compares to the answer suggested by The Mentoring Group.

Scenario

You agreed to be a mentor in your organization's new mentoring program. After a lengthy matching process, you were paired with a person who is extremely shy. You're very outgoing, so this has proved a challenge for you. Your mentee is very diligent, shows up for all your meetings, does mentoring homework, and frequently expresses appreciation to you. You notice that when you and this person are talking she/he almost never makes eye contact with you. Most of the people in your organization value eye contact. What do you do?

Possible Responses

- A.** You assume this is a cultural or style difference not only to accept but to respect and honor. You cut down on the amount of eye contact you make with her/him.
- B.** You start smiling broadly every time he/she looks you in the eye. You believe if you do this often enough, through conditioning, your mentee will start making more eye contact with you.
- C.** You write a note to your mentee describing what you've noticed and suggesting he/she make more eye contact. You recommend that this be one of the goals the two of you work on in your relationship.
- D.** You bring up the topic of conversation styles in your organization and what seems to be valued. You ask your mentee if she/he has ever noticed anything about looking into people's eyes and you share your own experiences on the issue.

Suggested Response

We vote for **D** (gently bring up the topic and share your ideas and seek his/hers). One role of mentors (especially in U.S. organizations) is to help their mentees succeed and that usually means helping them do well in the mainstream. You can be sensitive to cultural and style issues, explore his/her reasons about having little or more eye contact, teach what you've learned, and encourage your mentee to try a variety of eye responses in different situations. Once you've had this conversation, your mentee may or may not want to choose this as a development objective.

- A.** (not saying anything and adapting your own style) You could certainly ignore the situation and hope some other mentor is more comfortable approaching this issue later. Yet you may be the only one honest enough to tackle what could be a career-limiting behavior. By changing your own eye contact in this relationship, you're not being yourself and you're giving a false message.
- B.** (using conditioning) This might work over a long time, but how much time do you have to devote to this partnership? Also, you run the risk of being misinterpreted!
- C.** (writing a note and asking for the change) This might feel easier, but it prevents your using the in-person discussion to illustrate your point. Just asking your mentee to change doesn't take into account why he/she is behaving in this way.