

When you overtake your mentor

The most talented go-getters often find older, wiser mentors to guide them early in the careers. But as more young managers ascend to the executive suite while still in their 20s and 30s, they are finding that they surpass their mentors in terms of pay or chain of command—and might even become their mentor's boss.

If you rise fast enough, then you can accomplish more than your mentor ever dreamed for himself. That creates a delicate situation in which a mentor's envy and jealousy can overtake his fond feelings for all your success. And you never want a mentor to turn against you.

Here's how to maintain a positive relationship with your mentor despite your meteoric ascent:

Change the subject. When you first started meeting with your mentor, the dominant topic was you. Perhaps you were given advice on how to handle coworkers, how to tackle assignments and how to curry favor with the boss.

Don't assume that your needs continue to come first. Now that you've worked your way up the corporate ladder, turn the spotlight on your mentor. Show increased interest in him, and let him drive your conversations. He may want to turn the tables and ask for your input or share his concerns.

Lend a hand. Now that you're in a position of influence, your mentor may want you to help him. But he may feel too proud to ask for your help, even if you repeatedly ask, "Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

Just because you've not asked for a favor doesn't mean you should idly stand by. Quietly boost a mentor's standing by arranging for a better assignment, a pay increase or a nicer office. Your mentor never has to know that you played a role in pulling strings on his behalf.

Maintain consistency. Now that you're a big shot, don't discard the relationship like an old calendar. Keep up regular contact with your mentor. For example, if you always meet for breakfast every Monday, stick to the schedule. Remember: A satisfying payoff for a mentor is seeing you apply his advice so well and advance in the organization. Now more than ever, he wants to stay in touch and participate in your success.