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Another Birdie Flies

Skills and Professional Development



The life of a mentor and coach is bittersweet. If we're successful, we know that those whom we coach will leave and move on to better things. While we know it's for the best, it's still sad to see them go.

Just recently, another young protégé moved on to her dream job. It's the fourth time in the last four years. I am so proud of the young people I have worked with; it's been a privilege to watch them mature and grow. I believe that, whatever the differences between millennials and other generations, they are really no different than young people in prior times in history.

When we are young, we tend to be more inwardly focused. We need opportunities to learn that our parents will not always be there to smooth over the rough patches and tough times. As we encounter challenges and no one steps in, we'll learn to navigate them, and grow in the process. The "helicopter parent" and "trophy mentality" parenting styles that are associated with millennial growth may have delayed those experiences. In my observations, the growth eventually comes because parents get tired of continually problem solving for their children, who are more than capable of solving their own problems.

As I've watched and listened to these young people, I realize they want what I wanted and those who came before me wanted: to live a life of significance and contribution and to be the absolute best people they can be. They want acceptance, acknowledgement, and promotion, but contrary to public opinion and some harsh videos I've viewed online, they are not looking for handouts. They want to work for those things. And to the degree they are not willing to do so, it is because they don't know they have to.

Our job is not to ridicule them, but to take them under our wings and show them a path to growth. One of the most painful experiences I had last year was with one of my mentees. She found out that her highly sought after promotion was going to another person. She came into my office heartbroken. I had to tell her that as badly as she wanted the position, she simply wasn't ready.

She had many great qualities we admired: Her disposition and initiative would have helped her in the position. But the core skill set needed for the job was lacking. It would have been easier to not have that conversation, and instead say the hiring committee made a mistake, avoiding the look of disappointment on her face, but being a mentor is not about taking the easy way out. Tough love is necessary to help someone on one's journey to self-discovery. So my mentee and I talked and there were tears. Despite her sadness, I saw a determination to make us pay for not giving her what she wanted. I gently convinced her that though this decision was hers to make, she could easily ruin her chance for promotion by being vindictive. The better approach was for her to shore up her skills so the next internal (or external) opportunity would be hers. I ended our conversation by reiterating she had to remain true to herself as she honed her skills. She could not let the disappointment keep her from being the hard worker she's always been.

It took a few days, but she eventually came back and thanked me for the support. I noticed that as the sting of not getting what she wanted subsided, she was back to her vivacious self. She continued to seek positions she wanted outside of our organization, but the results were the same. Over the course of the last year, she was in my office during every interview process and after the denials. Each time, she was a little stronger and more confident. Not getting the job just meant it wasn't the right fit for her — yet.

She continued to do her job, used her initiative to take on tasks to develop the skills she needed, and accepted constructive input to improve areas where she struggled. Then the day happened: She walked into my office to say that she had accepted the position of her dreams elsewhere. I was and am proud of her. I am happy for her and know that as long as she takes who she is with her, she will do well. But that leaves me back at the drawing board, knowing that hiring her replacement will mean giving, and then losing again, to the dreams of youth.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.