Executive EDGE

MENTORING MINORITIES

Despite fashionable talk about "diversity," African Americans still have great difficulty advancing in U.S. companies. Studies show that even those who rise tend to get stuck in middle management, a result that has little to do with talent or the lack of it. And those people of color who *do* eventually become top executives usually require help from white mentors.

In any mentor-protégé relationship, the former typically offers the latter three vital services:

- Advice on ways to increase technical proficiency (suggesting relevant courses and seminars, for example).
- Help in polishing political skills (offering counsel on what is and is not "done" in the workplace culture).
- Sponsorship *vis a vis* other managers and executives (letting them know, in various subtle ways, that the protégé enjoys the mentor's protection).

Because racism is a fact of life, minority protégés need such services even more than white protégés do. But executives who would like to mentor minorities should keep several possible complications in mind.

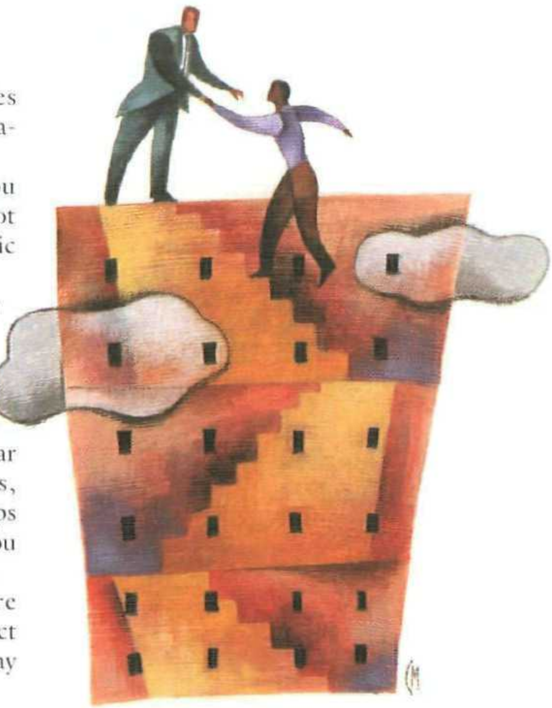
Negative Stereotypes Behave as if you expect your protégé to succeed. Do not saddle him or her with putative ethnic characteristics.

Identification and Role Modeling Effective mentoring occurs when both parties see something of themselves in each other. Look for your own good traits in your protégé.

Skepticism about Intimacy Be clear about your goals. Some coworkers, believing cross-racial work relationships impossible, may suggest that either you or your protégé has an ulterior motive.

Public Scrutiny Because they are unusual, cross-racial relationships attract attention, which can be distracting. Stay focused on what you want to achieve.

Peer Resentment Out of jealousy, your protégé's peers may try to drive a wedge between you. Do what you can to help him or her resist such pressures.



From David A. Thomas, "Race Matters: The Truth about Mentoring Minorities," Harvard Business Review, *April 2001, pp. 99-107.*

THE ART OF DOWNSIZING

With the economy looking less robust every day, downsizing is becoming a much more common occurrence in today's workplace. In fact, in January 2001, the outplacement firm Challenger Gray & Christmas noted 142,208 layoffs in the United States, the highest monthly total since 1993.

Sadly, companies have become so skilled at orchestrating layoffs that many have forgotten that the process is more of an art than a science. "Organizations that have been through [layoffs] several times think it's business as usual," says Tom Silveri, CEO of Drake Beam Morin. "This is not a process that should be taken lightly."

Experts agree that *communicating a clear plan* for the personnel cut is the first priority. Employees are stakeholders in the company and should be treated with the same respect in the decision-making process. Once the need for downsizing is apparent, organizations should decide, in conjunction with division managers, which positions to cut so as not to lose employees with irreplaceable expertise. Planners should also get input from all sides—including legal, human resources, finance, operations, and public relations—to avoid mistakes or the appearance of discrimination. Most important may be preparing the employees who will be breaking the news—they need to know how to convey the message in a calm and professional manner.

When it comes time to announce the layoffs formally, the organization should *accept responsibility*. "It's easy to say the economy is going through a down cycle," says Alan Downs, a former downsizing specialist. "But one of the most effective things to say is 'we goofed.'" Most consultants suggest breaking the news early in the day and early in the week—avoiding holidays—and to keep the meetings short and stress that the decision is not personal. In addition, an employee's manager should convey the news, not a faceless corporate axman.

Finally, *communication with survivors is critical*. "The worst thing managers can do is what they want to do, which is hide in the office," says Joan Caruso, managing director at the Ayers Group. Those staying with the company need to be fully aware of any changes in their jobs or their managers' expectations. Leaders may also have to "re-sell" the organization's vision and future outlook. "Part of laying off people is recruiting those who stay," says Jacques Leger, managing consultant at Watson Wyatt.

From Matthew Boyle, "The Not-So-Fine Art of the Layoff," Fortune, *March 19, 2001, pp. 209-210.*

Illustration by Chris McAllister

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