

Dear Aleksandra,

*I am writing to you for advice about my role as a mentor for junior women at my university. Lately my university has been emphasizing the preparation of women leaders for the administration. I welcome this development, although I personally have never been drawn toward administrative roles. Can you offer any advice on how I might mentor junior women who wish to become administrators as well as those who do not wish to join the administration, but who prefer to focus on their roles as teacher-scholars? I admit to experiencing some conflict about how people on either track perceive those who choose the other track.*

Regards,

A Scholar-Teacher

Dear Scholar-Teacher,

A woman's work is never done, but of the many kinds of work we do, mentoring other women has to be among the most rewarding. Others opened doors for us, and it is a privilege and a pleasure to be able to pay it forward. Especially for those without tenure, whether in untenured or non-tenure track positions, it can be hard to know who is a safe and trustworthy source of advice. By sharing knowledge and experience with our junior colleagues, they can more readily navigate what are sometimes murky and treacherous waters.

When we are approached by junior female colleagues for advice, or tapped to serve in a more formal mentoring capacity, we do both the work of mentoring itself and, simultaneously, the modelling for the next generation of how to mentor. That is a serious responsibility that benefits from self-reflection. Your own style and strengths will shape your approach, but, whatever else you bring to the job, two qualities are essential: deep listening and non-judgment.

As you well know, your job as a mentor is not to tell someone what to do. You can only offer your perspective based on your experience and knowledge. To deploy that perspective in a way that is useful and meaningful, you need to really hear what your junior colleagues are saying—what are their professional aspirations? What are their priorities? What excites them intellectually? What are their ambitions? Keep reminding yourself—this is about them, not you.

Administrative roles have held no allure for you, but surely you can see the appeal for others. If you make your way up the food chain, the pay can be generous compared to academic salaries (I will resist the temptation to go down the rabbit hole of how vexatious that is). For those with a real flair for this work, the administrative track offers mobility that is hard to find in academia unless you are a real star. You may have a colleague who is burnt out in or ill-suited to the classroom, or demoralized by the seemingly endless stream of uninspired papers. I know of someone who took up an administrative post, despite a thriving research career, because, among other considerations, the thought of ever grading a paper again made him want to gouge his eyes

out à la Oedipus. Budgets and endless meetings may not be the stuff of your dreams, but you need to listen carefully to hear if they are someone else's.

Remembering that this is about them, not you, will help you bring non-judgment to that deep listening. Your junior colleagues value and respect your perspective, or they would not come to you for advice. You surely want them to feel safe with and accepted by you so that they will be open about the decisions they are weighing. You will not invite that kind of vulnerability if they sense that you see the paths they are considering as lesser.

You say that you welcome your university's encouragement of women to take up an administrative path, even if it is not for you. Women in powerful administrative roles have the potential to be change agents in the institution and as a mentor you have the opportunity to encourage junior women who show interest to step into these influential roles. As a mentor your job is not to urge all women to do so, but to encourage those who show interest and aptitude.

As for how others perceive administrative, research, and teaching tracks, I for one don't give a crap. Women are taught from a young age to be sensitive to other people's needs and desire, even at the expense of our own longings. Perhaps the most uppity, rebellious thing some of us will ever do is to stop listening to all that background noise and to put first and foremost our own thoughts, values, priorities, and pleasures.

As a mentor, maybe the most important thing you can do through deep listening and non-judgment is to mirror back to your mentees their own thoughts, which they struggle to hear over the distracting background noise of others' value-laden perceptions.

In comradeship,

Aleksandra