

Being Nice or Getting the Job Done

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Advice



Brian Taylor

By Ms. Mentor August 12, 2010

Question (from "Delpha"): Am I turning into a shark?

I'm in charge of campus life at Good Little College, where we pride ourselves on working harmoniously and making everyone happy with dorm life and student activities. My assistant director, "Etta," a recent college graduate in her first professional job, is in charge of the arts program, which brings speakers, writers, and entertainers to our isolated little town. She oversees a student intern, who gets a chance to learn to do publicity, catering, and other arranging.

"Franny," this year's intern, had spectacular qualifications but has been an almost total flake. She's under the thumb of a boyfriend, "Petey," whose demands have controlled her life. ("I can't come to any meetings this week—Petey keeps texting me that he's feeling lonely. He needs me.")

Here's the last straw. Franny (who told us all this) washed Petey's laundry as usual and brought it to his room, where she found a classmate, "Germa," naked in his bed. (Petey'd gone out to buy beer.) Franny was so distraught that she didn't write the press release or contact the caterer or do anything for the appearance of Mr. Bigwig Political Figure—who wound up with an audience of 20 people. There wasn't even a microphone.

I fired Franny, but Etta's been imploring me to rehire her, because "she's a great kid, and she's so sorry you were annoyed, and she's crying her eyes out." Etta thinks I'm the meanie of the universe.

I'd like to throw them all out the window, Petey first, but we're on the first floor. What do I do now?

Answer: Ms. Mentor caught herself cooing, "Too bad about the first floor," but then pinched herself awake. Defenestration is not an appropriate sanction in any student handbook she's ever seen.

Instead, your job is education.

Franny will have to figure out on her own that there are other frogs in the swamp. Ms. Mentor hopes she's not deluded into thinking that Petey will change his selfish ways ("All he needs is enough love, and we'll live happily ever after"). That's been the ruin of countless women. A little tough love might help Franny—but to administer it, you have to be tough yourself. Don't hire her back. This is her life lesson.

Etta is the one for you to educate and change. She's confronting one of the great tasks of adult life: learning to separate the personal and the professional. It means figuring out which side she's on, and that's especially hard for people who've been in school all their lives.

School has a structure and a hierarchy that's known and comforting (which is why thousands of students still apply, like lemmings, to graduate school in the humanities). School life is Us versus Them: teachers as judges and barriers, students as a community united to get better grades, credits, and entertainment. There are warring cliques, but students are more apt to feel loyal to one another, in a We're-All-In-This-Together mode that's abruptly shattered if they get real jobs.

Youngish new professors often want to hang with graduate students closer to their age—rather than with senior faculty members who blather on about Vietnam and Socrates. But the senior folks know the rules, and newbies have to watch, listen, and learn—not simply decide who they're for and who they're against. It stops being a matter of liking.

("Justin," a new instructor of Ms. Mentor's acquaintance, was sure the old guys in his department didn't notice or care about him. He certainly didn't care about them. He didn't bother to learn their names, greet them, or even make eye contact in the halls. He acted as if they were a different species, while he gallivanted about with students, and was shocked when his elders, recognizing that "this young man doesn't contribute anything to the life of the department," voted not to rehire him.)

Etta also seems to be in the student mind-set, where happiness, personal relationships, and emotional temperatures are the center of one's life. (When the anthropologist "Rebekah Nathan" went undercover as a college student to write *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, she was shocked at what a tiny space students gave schoolwork in their conversations. Social life was everything.) In Etta's case, she identifies with Franny's pain, rather than seeing what professional harm has been done.

Mr. Bigwig Political Figure is unlikely to come to Good Little College again. His donors, and his political party, will be furious. The college president may be berated for the humiliation. In some small towns, where the college is the only entertainment, there may be a firestorm of angry letters to the newspaper.

Etta needs to put damage control first. That can be done through social calls, flattering notes, and apologies, but humble pie is never enough. There must also be announcements that the arts program "will be restructured" so such a fiasco won't happen again. There has to be the appearance of change—official and serious. Etta has to be Good Little College's defender—not Franny's hanky.

Ms. Mentor knows that there are always people willing to throw stones. Etta can be called "careerist," and as her boss, Delpha may be called a hard-hearted Hannah, a shrew, and a shark. But coddling Franny ("you poor dear")

trains her to be a ninny, and forgiving Etta ("you didn't know any better") trains her to be an irresponsible administrator, wanting to be liked rather than respected.

Ms. Mentor also urges faculty members and administrators to pay more attention to the Delphas and Ettas of academic life. Staff members in student services are always underpaid and underappreciated, although they are the ones who handle the crises and terrors of campus life. They respond to crimes as well as plagiarism; they provide support for desperate students—including the angry ones, the violent ones, the self-destructive ones. Those administrators are often the kindest face of academic life.

Their job used to seem easy: announce a "Volleyball game on the Old Main Lawn!" and everyone would come on down. Now students' fingers would have to be wrenched away from their BlackBerrys and iPods, and they'd have to make face-to-face conversations—a prospect so daunting that one freshman orientation offers a "[Facebook in the Flesh](#)" seminar, to help students learn to talk to one another with their voices.

Ms. Mentor trusts that Delpha and Etta have found their voices, and that poor Franny will learn to use her voice to say "No" to Petey and tell him to do his own dirty laundry. She's about to have a life.

Question: My assistant is lazy and disorganized, but if I fire him, I'll lose the money and not be able to hire anyone at all. Do I need to figure out how to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse, or a swine into pearls, or a pig into a prince?

Answer: Oink.

Sage Readers: Ms. Mentor welcomes end-of-summer odes and rants from her readers, along with queries and commentary. As universities downsize draconianly, she fears for American education, and would like to know of problems that can be solved. She regrets that she can rarely answer letters personally, and never immediately. Identifying details are always minced and pureed, and confidentiality is guaranteed, and anyway, everyone else has the same problems that you do.

(c) Emily Toth

Ms. Mentor, who never leaves her ivory tower, channels her mail via Emily Toth in the English department of Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge. She is the author of the recently published "Ms. Mentor's New and Ever More Impeccable Advice for Women and Men in Academia" (University of Pennsylvania Press). Her e-mail address is ms.mentor@chronicle.com.