

# Five Signs that Your Mentor Is Giving You Bad Advice

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Not long ago, I attended the “Forever Green Leadership Gala” in Menlo Park, a fundraiser for The Girl Scouts of Northern California. The event honored two women with impressive accomplishments: [NoosheenHashemi](#), who earlier in her career spent a decade at Oracle and was instrumental in its 1991 financial turnaround, and who has spent the past decade leading The HAND Foundation; and [Cisco Systems](#)’ Chief Technology & Strategy Officer [Padmasree Warrior](#), one of the most powerful engineers in Silicon Valley, often included in lists of the most powerful women in business, and a persistent advocate for bringing more women into science and technology. The keynote speaker was Sheryl Sandberg, famous both for her role as Facebook COO and for her advice to girls and women to “[Lean In](#).”

There was a lot of discussion of mentoring that night, and the virtues were demonstrated by the accomplishments of three impressive Girl Scouts. We were all taken by Varsha’s story about how her mentors at Girl Scouts guided her as she implemented an astounding [Gold Award](#) project: raising the funds for a maternity ward and getting it built in a remote village in India. Maddy told us all about how adults and older girls played key roles in [Space Cookies](#), an award-winning all-girls robotics team with over 80 members from 25 high schools. Most of all, we in the audience were moved by Larissa’s story of how her involvement in a range of Girl Scout programs helped her develop skills, confidence, and a social network that enabled her to make better choices. Larissa had been removed from her parents’ home – both were drug addicts — and placed in foster care. She explained how, by interacting with adult and peer mentors in Girl Scouts, she changed her path and became a good student on track to graduate early from high school and planning to major in social work in college. In turn, Larissa is committed to helping her brothers and sisters lead successful lives and to helping her mother – who has been clean for two years and now lives with her kids again – stay on track. Larissa was especially proud of the role that she now serves as a mentor in Girl Scout programs to other girls who, like her, are at risk.

I was at this inspiring event (about which you can read more [here](#)) thanks to my wife Marina Park’s work — she is CEO of the Girl Scouts of Northern California — but couldn’t help making the connection to my own. Huggy Rao and I, as research for our forthcoming book [Scaling Up Excellence](#), have spent the past several years studying what it takes to get constructive beliefs, actions, and skills to spread. The powerful mentoring that these girls have received through Girl Scouts, and that they now provide for other girls, is

a version of a process we saw in many of our success stories. If you can “connect people and cascade excellence,” better ways of operating have the best chance of taking hold.

But listening to the comments from the stage that night also made me see a new twist on the “connect and cascade” advice. This time, it was something that Sheryl Sandberg said during the panel conversation after her speech. She told us that, although mentors played a key role in her success, she learned not to believe everything they told her. It was a warning to all present that, even when someone wants to help you, they still can give you bad advice. So it is your responsibility, both for your own good and that of others, to think critically about what you’re told, and at times, choose to ignore it. Sheryl’s own examples were that mentors had advised her not to take the job as an executive at Google and not to take the job as Facebook COO – the very roles that have made her rich and famous.

What does this have to do with scaling? There’s a lesson for those who are struggling to take something that works well in one place and replicate it elsewhere. It just might be that people who are ignoring or rejecting the beliefs and behaviors you are trying to spread are not wrong. They may be doing what Sheryl did: considering your advice and concluding that, while it might have been good for others, it would be bad in their situation. This kind of constructive defiance might even be helpful to you, if what you’re trying to scale is actually very context-dependent, or is a bad idea you’ve got irrational faith in. As Huggy and I like to say, to spread excellence, the first order of business is to make sure that you’ve got some actual excellence to spread!

There is another lesson, of course, for the recipient of advice — and it’s the point Sheryl Sandberg was making. Even if you have the best of mentors, that does not relieve you of the task of figuring out your own best course of action. Mentees have to play an active role in judging the advice they get. With that in mind, and with reference to some applicable research, I’ll offer five signs that maybe you need to think harder about the advice your mentor is giving you:

**1. Are you straying from the path that your mentor has taken?** Piles of [research](#) on “social similarity” or “similarity-attraction” effects suggest that most mentors will have a positive reaction to paths you take that are reminiscent of their own and a negative reaction to paths that clash with their past choices. So if your mentor spent a year working in, say, China as part of his or her career and you are about to turn down a similar opportunity, don’t be surprised if he or she sees it as a mistake.

**2. What is in it for them?** Will some of your choices benefit your mentor more than others? The answer might be fairly obvious, but still be something that you (and your mentor, who will have imperfect self-awareness) don’t realize is subtly guiding the advice offered. For example, if you work closely today with your mentor, and make his or her life easier and more successful, that usually helpful and objective party might have a hard time giving you the best advice about an opportunity that will put you in a different role. I get annoyed by economists and other behavioral scientists who claim that self-interest is behind

every human word and deed – yet there is no denying that it affects every one of us, and more often and more deeply than we realize.

**3. Is your appetite for risk drastically different from your mentors?** If you are more comfortable with risk than your mentor, he or she may caution you against that crazy new startup or bold new project. I suspect that this was part of the story for Sheryl ; both Google and Facebook were high-risk adventures when she joined. Mismatches also go the other way. As [Huggy Rao](#) observes, if your mentor is a skydiver, races motorcycles, and has a history starting risky projects or doing big risky acquisitions – but the very thought of such things keeps you up at night and makes you physically ill – then you might not want advice from that person on taking a risky job or making a risky decision.

**4. Do you know more than they do?** Just because someone is older and more experienced than you are does not mean that they know more about the particular decision you are making. The more distant they are from the work you do and the business you work in, the more wary you should be. I suspect, for example, that Sheryl understood Facebook’s potential more than older mentors or those who weren’t so heavily steeped in the industry.

**5. Do your peers — and those you lead or mentor — know more about you than your mentor does?** There is a structural problem with many mentor-mentee relationships that I have implied in past writings: A large body of research shows that, in pecking orders of any kind, the people (and in, fact, animals) who have less power attended more closely to and understand those with more power than the other way around (see [here](#) and [here](#)). This so called “asymmetry of attention” means that you probably know a lot more about your mentor (who is likely more powerful than you) than your mentor knows about you. Consider some implications. You may be overestimating how well your mentor knows and understands you as a result (and thus putting too much faith in his or her advice). Such asymmetry also suggests that your peers, our better yet, the people who you lead and mentor, may give you the best advice. Indeed, I [have argued](#) (going back for some 30 years) that reverse mentoring is underappreciated and underused by both organizations and individuals.

Of course, I am not implying that your default posture toward a mentor’s advice should be skepticism and rejection. As those Girl Scouts’ stories demonstrated, when someone knows you and wants to see you succeed, anything they think you should know is worth listening to — and some of it may be essential to your subsequent success and happiness. But if you want to get the most out of mentoring, don’t take it as marching orders. For you and your mentor, the greatest success comes when you decide wisely for yourself.

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