

## Usually Nice, Always Helpful: A Mentor's Approach

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Being a mentor is not about being nice, it's about being helpful. Here's the difference: being nice is about making a person feel good; being helpful is about serving a person's best interest. The two usually go together, but the distinction comes into play when serving a person's best interest makes that person uncomfortable, a situation that arises easily when a mentor tries to be truly helpful. I know because I had a truly helpful mentor when I was on the tenure track in the early 1990s.

My mentor was Randy Pausch, who at the time was a young star in UVa's computer science department. Randy did not fit the Hollywood image of an academic mentor. He was in his early 30s with a boyish look and a disposition to match, always in high-energy mode. I was a junior faculty member in architecture, and chose Randy to be my designated mentor as part of a Lilly teaching fellowship.

Randy taught me the difference between being nice and being helpful over lunch. After we sat down and started talking, questions kept coming across the table:

- “Have you started making the list of external referees for your case?”
- “Do the senior faculty in your department know what you do?”
- “That new course you're developing, is it going to help move your research forward?”
- “How many papers do you have in the pipeline now?”
- “That project you talked about, is that really going to help you get tenure? If not, then *why* spend time on it?”
- “You're on *how many* committees?”
- “How does your work compare to the work of other people recently tenured in your field?”

And it continued. I enjoyed the lunch, but felt a bit of relief when the check came.

It wasn't nice to ask so many pointed questions, but it was helpful. Randy understood my long-term future was more important than my short-term comfort. Our lunch then would have been far more pleasant if he had just made a few sage statements mixed with casual chatter, but my career now is far more productive because he didn't.

There are few senior faculty who push junior faculty the way that Randy pushed me, in part I think because many think it wouldn't be nice. Unfortunately, that kind of niceness too often passes for collegiality in the academy. I would much rather have my colleagues be sincerely and bluntly helpful than politely and vacuously nice. Randy gave me a model of the kind of colleague that I want to have, and the kind of colleague I want to be: usually nice, always helpful.