



by Don Gomez

The one thing I wish I had known before I started my last job is that, in mentoring relationships, the mentee is almost always looking for practical advice - not cosmic wisdom.

That may seem simple, but is truthfully often difficult to deliver. Especially as you move further and further away from those similar experiences due to age and experience.

It is tempting to nod knowingly when listening to a mentee's problem and reminisce about how it was and how it felt when you were in a similar position, many years ago. After a moment, you may pontificate about that time and try to place the mentee's experience in a larger context. You might even suggest that as tough as it may seem right now, one day the mentee will look back at this experience fondly.

In most cases, the mentee is not interested in any of this. They are going through the grind *right now*, and at the tactical level, the grind matters. They need the information that you have, buried away. They need the information that you don't think about anymore.

Often, these are tangible things like leadership techniques, product templates, and organizational approaches.

On top of pontificating, there is a tendency to lean too much on using leading questions to

get the mentee to “discover” the answer to their problems themselves. This is a great technique and it is fulfilling to watch a mentee discover the solution to their problem on their own (with some guidance). But this should be done in small doses. If every problem becomes a maze for the mentee to navigate, the mentee will likely start seeking out the answers elsewhere. Mentors are not oracles.

There is a time and a place for deep conversations on the nature of service, or the way that one small event bleeds into another, and how over time, themes emerge that you will reflect on in the future. And if the mentee is specifically asking for these conversations, by all means, go for it.

But in the majority of cases, the mentee wants to know how to get through the gauntlet.

I’ve found this also to be true as a mentee. When I reach out to my mentors, I’m usually looking for practical advice. Often, I have to “cut through” the sage wisdom to get to the thing I need. Other times, I’m looking for that thematic discussion, and it can help.

But if the problem the mentee is bringing is timely and practical, just get them through the gauntlet.

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*Editor’s Note: In June, we asked our [From the Green Notebook](#) community a simple but profound question: What’s the one thing you wish you would have known before you started your last assignment? This week, we are pleased to share the nuggets of wisdom leaders have learned with the hope that it doesn’t have to be relearned by someone else the hard way.*

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