BusinessWeek

INTERACTIVE CASE STUDY March 25, 2008, 3:19PM EST

The Issue: A Guilt-Plagued Mentee

While an editor's star rises, her mentor crashes and burns. Should she have done more to help him?

When local TV news producer Christine Hong* changed careers by joining the fact-checking department of a major news Web site in New York City, she was excited about working in a different medium for a bigger, more prestigious organization. But she didn't know a soul at her new job. "Anytime you start at an organization, you need someone to guide you on everything from where can you get a good cup of coffee to 'what's the corporate culture here?" Hong says.

She could hardly look to her new boss for any guidance. He was a poor communicator who'd often expect her to fulfill duties he didn't adequately explain. When Hong asked him for help in learning the Internet technology necessary for the job, he referred her to a short-tempered, seemingly unstable colleague who answered yes-or-no questions with baffling 10-minute treatises.

Then she met Angelo, a managing editor based in Philadelphia who often visited the New York office. "He was someone higher up in the hierarchy. I worked with him a lot but didn't report directly to him," Hong recalls. "We hit it off professionally right away, and he was the first person to give me any guidance or feedback on my work. Also, he was the kind of person who would try to get to know people as human beings."

WINNING A PROMOTION

Soon he turned into a highly effective, if unofficial, mentor. "I could go to him and say, 'Look, XYZ person is giving me bad vibes. What do I do?"' With Angelo's help, she learned to compensate for the foibles of co-workers in her department, which freed up time to pursue her real career goal: to become a full-time editor and writer.

Angelo gave Hong writing assignments and editing duties—and advised her on how to take on the extra responsibility without rankling her manager. Thanks in good part to his guidance and constructive criticism, Hong won a promotion to senior news editor and began reporting directly to him.

Then the Christine-Angelo juggernaut came to an abrupt halt. The editor-in-chief, Helmut, decided to move Angelo's job to New York. He gave Angelo the choice of relocating or quitting. When neither option suited him, the situation became unpleasant. "I was sympathetic to Angelo, of course," Hong says. "I told him I really wanted him to stay at the company. But once lawyers got involved, Helmut told me not to discuss the situation with Angelo."

A COLD FAREWELL

The awkwardness grew when Helmut assigned some of Angelo's duties to Hong. "In a way it was good for Angelo—it freed up some of his time so he could hunt for another job," recalls Hong. "But he also resented it. And he'd say negative things about Helmut and expect me to agree. I really couldn't, because I liked Helmut."

Angelo started taking it all personally, according to Hong. "I could tell Angelo felt I wasn't supportive enough—he thought I should have gone to bat for him and try to persuade Helmut to let him keep working from Philadelphia. But it just didn't seem my place to do that, and it wasn't right for the business, either."

By the time Angelo left the job, coldness and formality had taken the place of openness and friendship. Hong now had his old job, a position she found fulfilling and enjoyable in many ways. But how things turned out between her and her

former mentor and boss still bother her. Had she simply done the best she could in a difficult situation? Or had she failed her mentor in an unforgivable way?

**This case study is based on a true story, but names and identifying details have been changed.*

Reisner is an editor at BusinessWeek.com .

The Analysis: The Mentor Who Asked Too Much

Despite his generosity toward his mentee, expecting her to reciprocate by entering a battle on his behalf was unfair

After joining a New York news Web site, Christine benefited from the advice and tutelage of Angelo, a co-worker who turned into her informal mentor. Then she profited even more when she received his old job—after he was forced to quit by a boss, Helmut, who insisted he move to Philadelphia or pack his bags.

To Angelo, it had seemed only natural that Christine should knock on Helmut's door and ask him to reconsider the ultimatum and allow him to stay in Philadelphia. To Christine, it sounded like an awkward situation she had no business entering.

Who erred? Well, they both did, according to the experts. Let's start with Angelo. "In a typical mentor-mentee relationship, it would be unusual for a mentee to step up to the boss for her mentor," says Kathleen Pytleski, a senior vice-president at the consulting firm Menttium in Minneapolis. "She wouldn't have had the right to ask the same of him, either."

A LACK OF SYMPATHY

Indeed, say career coaches and consultants, the mentor-mentee relationship is about consultation with each other, not intervention with a third party. "The situation doesn't sound like one she could have made a case for even if she'd wanted to," says New York career coach Phyllis Rosen. After all, how many bosses appreciate meddling or gratuitous advice from subordinates? It might have led to an ouster for Christine as well as Angelo.

As for Christine's error, it lay in a lack of sympathy rather than a surfeit of ambition. There was nothing wrong with her desire for promotion, even when it meant taking over Angelo's job. "I've seen people sabotage their careers because they don't want to rise above the mentor," says Joel Garfinkle, an executive career coach at Garfinkle Executive Coaching in Oakland, Calif. "The reverence for the mentor can make the mentee lessen his or her skills."

So if taking Angelo's job was no sin, how did Christine go wrong? "When the mentor put in his resignation, it should have triggered a series of events that ensured the relationship stayed intact," says Chason Hecht, president of Retensa Retention Experts in New York. That meant Christine should have treated Angelo's departure with the same sympathy and caring she would give to a good friend or a spouse who was fired.

AMENDS COULD HAVE BEEN MADE

"You should reach out to the mentor to offer help," says Garfinkle. "Be specific. Instead of asking if there's anything you can do, say, 'Can I connect you with someone?'" And she should have taken the opportunity to express to Angelo how much his advice and friendship had meant to her.

After the warm rapport between her and Angelo froze into awkward formality, she should have approached him to make amends. "There should have been a conversation with him to understand why he felt disappointed," says Pytleski. "Talking it through and solving the problem could have resulted in a much stronger relationship in the future." There's no saying Angelo couldn't turn around and hire Christine to work with him in whatever new job he got outside the company.

Regardless of any mistakes Christine and Angelo may have made, experts agree that some of the blame lies with a third party: the company itself for not offering employees a formal mentoring program. "Mentors and mentees need

training," says Hecht.

According to Rosen, a formal mentoring program should start with a frank talk about expectations and goals, and it should include regularly scheduled meetings and communications "so the relationship is not left to haphazard circumstances."

Unfortunately, in this case the informal relationship between Christine and Angelo that led to such a warm friendship and strong working relationship ultimately caused the hard feelings on his part. Even though the relationship ended badly, however, Angelo has something good to take with him to his next employer. "Having a mentee allowed him to validate his skills in guidance," says Kathleen Barton, a senior consultant with the Mentoring Group in Grass Valley, Calif. "He can use that skill to coach the staff at his new job."