

**Do You *See* What I See?**  
**A Rich Resource for Faculty Part 2:**  
**Dr. Thompson's Mentoring Tip for the Week**

January 28, 2013

Dear Colleague:

In my mentoring essay that you received several weeks ago, I asked “Do You Hear What I Hear?” My goal was to remind you that the tenure clock should always be ticking loudly in your ears. Now, I’m asking a different question: “Do you *see* what I see?” My goal this week is to help you *see* that one of the best resources available to you might be closer than you think. That resource is your colleagues. The point that I want to emphasize is that “If you become strategic, your colleagues can make your job a lot easier.” Instead of viewing them through a narrow lens, I urge you to view them as a potential goldmine that can make your academic career more rewarding. Therefore, I hope that the following related suggestions will be helpful.

**1. Keep your eyes open.**

In 1998, when I accepted my first university tenure track position, Dr. Agnes Moreland Jackson, a professor emeritus, told me something that I’ve never forgotten. She said, “Be kind, cordial, and professional with your new colleagues, but be careful whom you trust.” Her warning implied that I should keep my eyes open and use discernment in interacting with faculty. I’d advise you to also keep her words of wisdom in mind. By “keep your eyes open,” I mean that you should scrutinize your colleagues in order to discern which ones can help you and which ones can harm you.

Faculty are extremely busy. Whenever you arrive on campus, you probably have several tasks to complete. Therefore, it's logical to rush to your office, close the door, and avoid interacting with people as much as possible, especially if you are an introvert. However, if you limit your contact with your colleagues, you might miss out on some great opportunities. Your office might be located near the offices of several individuals who would be willing to help you navigate the tenure and promotion process, give you advice, or work on one or more projects with you. Therefore, always be on the lookout for colleagues who can help you in some way, and for those with whom you might be able to form a strong professional bond, but don't forget to proceed with caution. The appendix section of Gavin DeBecker's *The Gift of Fear and Other Survival Signs That Protect Us From Violence* contains suggestions that can help you strengthen your discernment skills.

## **2. Keep your ears open.**

In January 2011, I flew to FSU from California to be interviewed for my current position. During my first visit to campus, I met numerous administrators, faculty, and staff. In addition to preparing a presentation that summarized my "vision" for the job that I sought, I also had to undergo several interviews. During the department-level interview, one faculty member asked, "If you become our Endowed Professor of Education, how do you plan to help faculty, because I believe that rising tides float all boats?" Although I was totally unprepared for this question, I quickly tried to hide my nervousness, prayed silently for a sensible response, gave him a reply, and made a mental note to revise my presentation. As soon as I had a free moment, I turned on my computer and added "faculty mentoring" to my presentation.

Because I was willing to listen carefully to the aforementioned professor's concern, I was able to strengthen my vision statement. Consequently, since I accepted my current position, I've been able to do some of the most rewarding work that I've done in years: mentoring untenured faculty through the weekly essays that I write, the writing workshop series that I developed for faculty, the Faculty Needs Assessment that I created, several collaborative writing projects that I've undertaken with untenured faculty, and the meetings I've had with untenured faculty. Therefore, when you listen carefully to your colleagues during informal conversations in the hallway, your office, etc, and in department and school-level meetings, you may also learn about niches that need to be filled, problems that need to be addressed, and potential research topics that are worth pursuing.

### **3. Choose to be a collaborator rather than a competitor.**

By now, I'm sure you realize that academia can be a competitive and ruthless, "dog-eat-dog" environment in which to work. If you don't believe me, read *Rosalind Franklin: The Dark Lady of DNA*. In this riveting biography, author Brenda Maddox explains how Franklin, a scientist and university researcher, spent years trying to unlock the DNA code. Because her goal obsessed her, Franklin worked long hours, got little sleep, and neglected her health. Even after learning that she was terminally ill, Franklin continued to let this project consume her. One day, when she was out of her office, a colleague snuck into her office, read her notes, and quickly saw what Franklin had failed to see: the answer to the DNA code. Instead of offering to collaborate with Franklin and give her the credit that she deserved, he shared the information with other researchers. In the end, the men got the credit, including fame and a Nobel Prize; at age 37, Franklin

died in obscurity. This is merely one graphic example that I could share about how cold-blooded academia can be.

In my opinion, one of the cures for the rampant ruthlessness in higher education is collaboration versus competition. I've met individuals who like, Rosalind Franklin's colleague, were so competitive that they would probably step on their own mother's grave to attain their professional goals. However, I've also met individuals who were willing to collaborate with colleagues in order to achieve their professional goals. In the long run, the second group tended to earn more respect than the first group. They also appeared to be happier and equally--if not-- more productive as the first group.

For example, about 12 years ago, when I taught at a four-year comprehensive public university in California, I met a group of women who had formed a writing team. Each year, they planned to write a certain number of articles, and they took turns taking the lead on the articles. When they submitted their tenure portfolios to be reviewed, the team had exceeded the required number of articles for tenure, and each woman had served as lead author, second author, and third author enough times to gain approval for each level of the tenure review process. After they earned tenure, the group continued to write as a team, so that each time that they went up for promotion or for their files to be reviewed, they had plenty of recent publications.

Instead of working in isolation, I suggest that you look carefully at your colleagues in your department, school, and elsewhere on campus and try to form your own writing team. Search for individuals who have integrity, a strong work ethic, who are willing to collaborate with you, and who are willing to take turns serving as first, second, third

author, etc. If you choose the right team, I'm certain that you'll find that writing with a team can become mutually beneficial for tenure and beyond.

#### **4. Don't "judge a book by its cover."**

Faculty in academia come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and everyone has strengths and weaknesses. One group that has always intrigued me consists of senior faculty, especially those who have worked in one location for a long period of time. These individuals possess a wealth of knowledge that can be very useful to untenured faculty and other newcomers. For example, many of them have served on department and school-level Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion committees, and all of them have survived the process themselves.

Therefore, instead of fearing or avoiding senior faculty, I suggest that you view them as potential mentors and professional role models. If you take the time to visit their offices, and introduce yourself, you'll find that many are wonderful individuals who can become assets to you. After you introduce yourself, here are some questions that you might consider asking during your visit:

- What advice can you give me about being successful at this university?
- Can you share any tips about the tenure process?
- Would you mind if I stopped by your office periodically just to chat?
- If I appear to be on the wrong track, would you please let me know?
- In the future, will you share advice with me whenever you think of anything else that I need to know?

## 5. Steer clear of Dr. J. I. H.

Sometimes, the world appears to be full of “haters,” and quite a few of them have found a home in academia. In academia, the typical hater is like Dr. J. I. H. His/her first name is Jealous. His/her middle name is Insecure. His/her last name is Hater. In your quest to strengthen your relations with your colleagues and find ways to benefit from what they can offer you, it’s important to beware of Dr. Hater.

Haters come in all shapes, sizes, races, genders, and from all types of religious backgrounds, and age groups. A young hater can be just as lethal as an old one, so don’t let a person’s age fool you. From the extensive reading that I’ve done on pathology, I’ve learned that many haters are actually malignant narcissists. To learn more about various types of haters and destructive individuals, I suggest that you read Paul Babiak and Robert Hare’s *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*, Jean Lipman-Blumen’s *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*. . . , Cheryl Dellasega’s *Mean Girls Grown Up*. . . , and Dr. Scott Peck’s *The People of the Lie* . . . . In order to be able to identify, and steer clear of Dr. Hater in the workplace, here are some “red flags,” to look for:

- has a jealous-spirit
- is usually quite negative
- is very critical and rarely has a kind word to say about you or anyone else,
- is a control-freak who wants you to (figuratively speaking) “bow down” and kiss his/her behind or feet
- is extremely insecure but hides it behind a superiority complex

- After being in this colleague's presence, you usually feel bad, uneasy, or confused.

The rule to remember is that "If the colleague walks like a hater, talks like a hater, and looks (has an ugly expression on his/her face whenever he/she looks at you) like a hater," the colleague is probably Dr. Hater. So, run, don't walk away from this individual! And keep running: not out of fear, but for self-preservation purposes. Toxic people will spread their poison to you if you let them. Furthermore, they will attempt to undermine you and try to keep you from achieving your goals. Because Dr. Hater is fundamentally a miserable individual, he/she is looking for company.

## **6. Don't get a "big head."**

The longer you work in academia and the more that you accomplish, the greater the likelihood that you'll be tempted to get a "big head." As you begin to amass publications, get speaking invitations, grow in popularity with students, etc. your self-confidence will increase, and you may even begin to believe that "you're all that and more." Be careful that you don't get an inflated ego. When faculty become arrogant, they begin to act as if:

- They are superior to others.
- They accomplished everything on their own without anyone else's help.
- They don't need to help anyone else.
- They disparage colleagues who are struggling to get published or who are having some other type of work-related problem.

In my opinion, the greatest danger of getting a big head is that if you do, chances are great that you'll become the new Dr. Hater. However, throughout your academic career, if you remember the following points, you can avoid becoming another Dr. Hater:

- No matter what you accomplish, remember that character, integrity, and what really matters most in the long run, have little to do with your professional accomplishments.
- Always try to treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Don't abuse your power.
- Remember that no matter how much you accomplish professionally, there will always be some young, new "hotshot" who is seeking to topple you off of your pedestal.
- Remember that your education and professional accomplishments don't make you better than or superior to others.
- Stay humble.

#### **7. Don't forget to help others.**

If you recall your first few months on campus as a new faculty member, I'm sure you'll remember that at times, you felt lonely, isolated, confused, and even wondered why you chose this profession in the first place. Thinking back to those days may make it easier for you to empathize with newcomers who were hired after you. Just as you would have benefitted from colleagues who were kind, welcoming, and collegial, so will

new faculty members who are hired after you. The following suggestions are simple ways that you can help other faculty:

- Go out of your way to introduce yourself.
- Invite a new colleague to lunch.
- Compliment a new colleague or share a word of encouragement.
- Inform a new colleague that he/she can email or telephone you if the individual has any questions or just needs someone with whom to talk.
- Offer suggestions to a colleague who is struggling to jumpstart his/her writing agenda.
- Invite a colleague to collaborate with you on a writing project.
- Share Calls for Papers, and Calls for Proposals with a colleague.

In other words, why not operationalize the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you?” If more faculty thought in this way, academia would be healthier, less toxic, and less ruthless. I also believe that there would be fewer Dr. Haters around, and more faculty would end up getting tenured and promoted on time.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout your academic career, if you think and act strategically, your colleagues can become one of the greatest resources at your disposal. The good ones can help you become better. Even Dr. Hater can be helpful to you, for his/her behavior may dissuade you from following the path of becoming a HWAD: a Hater With a Doctorate.

As you sort out the good colleagues from the bad ones, keep your eyes and ears open, don't "judge a book by its cover," choose to collaborate rather than compete, steer clear of the haters, remain humble, and reach out and help untenured faculty and newcomers. If you do these things, I believe that your academic career will be a lot more rewarding and fun. In the meantime, hang in there, have a great week, **keep writing**, and be on the lookout for next week's mentoring advice, "Be Proud of Your Baby!"

Blessings and peace,

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