

APA DIVISION 15 PRESENTS

▶ **ONE TIP**

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**“BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF”**

**By Dr. Robert J. Sternberg**

Professor of Psychology, Cornell University

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The single most significant experience I have had in my career was one I had my first week of graduate school. It may sound odd that my most significant experience would be one I had at age 22, but I assure you, it's true. If you learn the lesson I learned, you will be well on your way to a successful, but more importantly, personally and professionally meaningful career.

That first week, the late Gordon Bower, my graduate advisor at Stanford, and Sharon, his wife, invited all his new students to his house for dinner.

There were five of us, as I recall, and of course we were all excited about going and, making a good impression. I don't remember much about the dinner, but I sure do remember the after-dinner surprise.



## ONE TIP PRESENTED BY APA DIVISION 15



Dr. Robert J. Sternberg is a Professor of Psychology in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University and an Honorary Professor of Psychology at Heidelberg University in Germany. He is a past president of the American Psychological Association and has also served as president of four of its divisions: General Psychology, Psychology and the Arts, Educational Psychology, and Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology.

After dinner, Gordon brought us together in his living room and asked each of us what we planned to study in our graduate career. Of course, it all made sense, because it was a chance for Gordon to get to know us and for us to get to know each other.

At the time, Gordon was deeply engaged in research on “semantic memory,” or memory for words and connected concepts stored in long-term memory, such as, for me, the meaning of the expression “semantic memory.” Such memory could be distinguished from “episodic memory,” which is memory for events and stuff we have memorized, like a list of words, someone’s birthday, or where we put our cell phone.

So, Gordon asks the first guy (we were all “guys” that year) what he wants to study,

and the guy says, “semantic memory.” No big deal. Then Gordon asks the second guy, and he too says, “semantic memory.” I remember thinking to myself, “Hey, he’s lying! He wants to study perception. He’s just sucking up!” Then Gordon asks the third guy, and, you guessed it, he says, “semantic memory.”

At this point, I was sweating bricks. I did not want to study semantic memory. I wanted to study intelligence, something in which Gordon had little, if any interest. And now it was my turn to answer Gordon’s question. Well, I want you to know that I am someone who always has valued being true to myself. I’m not a brown-noser, a suck-up, or an a..-licker. Not me! So, Gordon asks me, and I answer: “semantic memory.” Gordon smiled and moved on.

Yep, I sold out.

I went home to our apartment at Casa Carolina that night, and I felt totally humiliated. I’d done it to myself. And I promised myself that I would never do that again. And so far, as well as I can recall, I never have. I wasn’t going to just follow the crowd or think or do what I thought people wanted, not Gordon and not anyone else.

So, my one piece of advice to you who are starting out in your career is to be true to yourself. Academia doesn’t pay all that well and there are a lot of headaches. But the one thing it offers is a chance to do work that is personally and professionally meaningful, and that hopefully will make the world, at some level, better. Don’t blow your opportunity. Figure out what is meaningful to you and go for it. Let the rest of them sell out. Figure out who you are and who you can become and be that person.

ONE TIP is published quarterly by APA Division 15 (Educational Psychology). In each issue, senior scholars share their stories and insights to guide and inspire junior scholars. For recommendations or suggestions, please contact Serena Shim, Division 15 ONE TIP Editor, at [sshim@bsu.edu](mailto:sshim@bsu.edu)