

Mentoring for Success

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Mentoring: What It Is, What It Isn't

At its core, mentoring is counseling and teaching. Its the passing on of experiences, expertise and wisdom. Great mentoring however is more than just the imparting of facts, figures and other pertinent information. Rather, it is inspired tutelage with the goal being to stimulate the pursuit of learning for progress.

Mentoring is not management, supervision, or coaching per se. These are more formal and procedural-based disciplines that, in the business environment, have very different operational purposes. For example, managers direct and control the general affairs of business, supervisors have the charge and direction for more rudimentary business functions, and coaches provide operationally oriented training, instruction and direction. For all three, the principal mission is to maximize performance. But for the mentor the mission is to develop potential.

Often mentoring is paired with management, supervision, or coaching. It really should be a separate function. Otherwise, its importance can be lessen in that the process of mentoring may be relegated to that of simply a single advisory session or some indiscriminate number of ineffective counseling events.

Origins of Mentoring

The word mentor hails from Greek Mythology. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the literary classic, the principle character, Odysseus, goes off to war. Before doing so he turns the tutelage of his son Telemachus over to his friend Mentor. In Odysseus' absence, his son is "mentored" (or tutored, taught, counseled and perhaps even coached) in the ways of the world by Mentor.

Mentor Defined

In The American Heritage Dictionary the word mentor is defined as a wise and trusted counselor or teacher.

In business, a mentor is an individual within an organization who is a highly regarded top manager that takes selected subordinates under his or her wing, if you will, and grooms them for bigger and better things in a somewhat informal, open-ended relationship.

Current Trends in Mentoring

Prior to the 1990's, management was practiced almost purely in a directive-style or methodology which can be best summed up as dictatorial in nature. For example, boundaries of the workplace were clearly delineated from the home, the work environment was rigidly structured and rather antiseptic, and the boss was king and workers did as told. Results therefore were achieved by driving organizational directives, often regardless of the human experience and the human condition, with one looming exception—job stability.

Since 1990 things surely have changed. Job stability is a misnomer in today's business environment, and distrust and self preservation is the rule rather than the exception. There's a constant need for change and adaptation due to the dependency on technology for operational effectiveness and competitive advantage. The roles, responsibilities, and influence of women and people of diverse cultures in the work force are expanding. Emerging world economic pressures are increasing in a rapidly developing global economy. And, as we change from an industrial- to an information-based society, workers and bosses alike must rely more on their brains than their brawn to succeed. These factors have combined to create a new paradigm in the workplace.

To achieve long term success in today's business environment, companies must treat their people differently and develop their potential. They seek new and better ways to manage. Over the past 10 to 15 years, many have found that mentoring is a most prudent method for developing their people.

So, What Does a Mentor Do Anyway?

These days the central role of the Mentor is to amplify the human potential. In doing so, he or she 1) fashions resilient workers capable of managing change and moving forward in spite of obstacles, 2) empowers responsible employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to perform most effectively and demonstrate their readiness for greater responsibilities and 3) encourages existing subordinates to remain with the company while also attracting other highly capable and motivated employees to the organization.

How the Mentoring Process Works

There are four key (or foundational) elements that make up a successful mentoring process. They are: trust, time, dialog and sharing.

Trust, the root of the mentoring relationship, must be established from the beginning. The mentor understands this, and is consistently on guard to maintain it. He or she is also aware that trust can take months to build, but only a moment to destroy.

Once this bond is secure, the mentor must make him- or herself freely available to the mentee. There is no room in the mentoring relationship for a “don’t call me, I’ll call you” attitude.

To work most effectively, the mentoring relationship must be based on rich and open dialog. In other words, the communications must not be one-way, or it becomes a lecturing series rather than a counseling process.

The overall atmosphere of the mentoring relationship must be one of both sharing and caring. The mentor understands that not only must information be freely and regularly exchanged, but it must also be done with respect and appreciation for the vulnerabilities, sensibilities and capabilities of the mentee.

When these four elements are properly implemented, both parties reap the benefits of a lively, insightful relationship. Most importantly, the mentees is stimulated to grow and develop his or her knowledge and skills, and is better prepared to move ahead in confidence.

In addition to the foundational elements, there are also four distinctive periods of time that must play out for a successful mentoring relationship to develop. These are: 1) the getting acquainted period, 2) the period of setting expectations and goals, 3) the

period where goals and expectations are worked through and met and 4) the period for closure of the relationship.

The getting acquainted period is the time that the bond of trust between mentor and mentee is established. The best way to do this is for the mentor to take the time to get to know the mentee on an individual basis. He or she will want to explore the mentee's personality and interests. The mentor will also want to let the mentee get to know him or her. This develops a rapport which will lead to the straightforward communication so essential to all successful mentoring relationships.

Once accomplished, it will then be time to move to establishing parameters and objectives for both sides in the mentoring relationship. The mentor and mentee must work closely to set realistic expectation and measurable goals. These agreements should be put in writing, and stated in such a way that they are clear, sharply focused and doable.

Next comes the time for both mentor and mentee to act: the results-oriented phase, if you will. It is a time of great acceptance between mentor and mentee, and positive change and growth for the mentee. It is also the time to take the mentee to task if he or she is not doing his or her part to deliver the desired results. The mentor keeps close tabs on the mentee, helps him or her make corrections and overcome obstacles, and provides positive encouragement as needed.

Now it's time to dissolve the relationship. Keep in mind that a mentoring relationship is not meant to be a lifetime proposition. Rather, its principle purpose is to help people help themselves. While ending the mentor-mentee relationship does not mean that any and all contact between the two is broken off, it does mean that the mentor has

done all that he or she can, and that the mentee is ready to move forward on his or her own without the mentor's help.

What are the Mentee's Responsibilities?

The mentee must be a full partner in the mentoring process. As such, he or she must fully and consistently demonstrate trust and trustworthiness, commit to and provide the necessary time and attention, be open and responsive in his or her communications and be respectful of any sensitive or confidential information the mentor provides.

Throughout the mentoring process, the mentee must work as hard as the mentor to get acquainted, set expectations and goals, follow through, and be willing to end the mentoring relationship when appropriate. The mentee must also be ready to take the necessary steps to move forward and demonstrate real progress.

How to Evaluate the Mentoring Exercise

While the mentoring process should be evaluated, there should not be a formal nor elaborate plan to do so. Remember, mentoring is less formal than management, supervision, or coaching. There are however four methods for evaluating the impact of mentoring. They are: 1) progress checkpoints, 2) feedback, 3) observations and 4) inquiries.

The mentor and mentee should periodically compare their progress to the expectations and goals initially set for the relationship. This should be done, both independently and collaboratively, with the focus on both parties' effectiveness in doing what they said they would do.

Either as part of the checkpoints practice or as a separate exercise, frank and objectives feedback (mentee to mentor and *vice-versa*) regarding the mentee's developmental progress is prudent. Meanwhile, the mentor observes the mentee in his or her work environment, and sees with his or her own eyes whether the mentee is meeting his or her goals and making the desired progress.

Conducting inquiries of the mentee's manager(s), peers, subordinates and/or customers is highly advisable. By speaking with those who work closest with the mentee, the mentor makes use of yet another valuable indicator of the mentee's progress.

The Most Common Pitfalls in Mentoring and How to Avoid Them

A mentor's slogan must never be "leave the decision making to me." The mentor's counsel to the mentee should be designed to fill in the blanks—to provide the mentee with options, if you will. Therefore, under all circumstances, the mentee must make his or her own decisions. The overriding theme in mentoring is to help people help themselves.

The mentor must recognize that his or her guidance is most appreciated when it is specifically asked for. Unsolicited advice on an unremitting basis will surely clog the ears of the mentee, who will eventually come to automatically disregard everything his or her mentor has to say. The mentor therefore must reframe from the "let me tell you what to do" kind of instruction.

Communications in the mentoring relationship must not be one-sided. On the part of the mentor, it becomes a lecture; on the part of the mentee, it becomes a bragging or

“bitching” session. Neither situation is acceptable. Thus, the mentor-mentee relationship must instead be a one-on-one relationship with robust give-and-take.

In mentoring, intimacy is core to the success of the relationship. Both must understand that the intimacy is about the open and genuine sharing of insights, observations and suggestions. Nothing more. Therefore, a firm handshake and other actions consistent with proper business etiquette should be the extent of the physical contact between the mentor and mentee.

Bottom Line: Why Mentoring?

In today’s business environment, mentoring is the new waves in management. It is therefore vital to your organization’s success, to your employees, and to you.

Mentoring effectively shifts the focus from the narrow minded, short sighted aspects of production-driven management to the more broadly focused proposition for real and sustainable success via the development of the human potential.

Why mentoring? It works, not only in the short term but also over the long run.

When thinking of the virtue of mentoring I am reminded of the statement: “Give a man a fish and you’ve fed him for a day, teach him to fish and you’ve fed him for a lifetime.” This, my friends is what mentoring does that management, supervision, or coaching alone cannot do.

Thank you! I hope today’s talk proves valuable as you work to implement a successful mentoring program in your organization. I’ll take your questions now.

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