

How to Start a Mentorship Program

By Jennifer Alsever

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How do you hang onto your brightest young talent *and* prepare them to lead? Simple: Recruit your more experienced employees to help teach and guide them. Not only can a mentoring program boost your bench strength for top jobs, research proves that people who learn more on the job are far less likely to quit, says Terri Scandura, a University of Miami management professor. “It makes the job more interesting to be learning from a senior person,” she says.

The benefits don’t stop with proteges: People who mentor often are more productive, better socialized, and less stressed, Scandura says. They also tend to develop a loyal network of supporters, gather valuable perspective from younger employees, and gain insight into other parts of the business. Here’s how IBM, Nationwide Insurance, and other companies create lasting programs that pay off.

Things you will need:

- Anywhere from \$100 for recognition gifts to \$50,000 for training sessions with a consultant.
- Three weeks to a few months to launch a program.
- **Program Goals:** Know why you’re developing the program. Is it to help newcomers adjust, groom future leaders, increase minority management?
- **Executive Participation:** Your CEO and top executives should join in as mentors or play some other visible role in supporting the program. If it’s not a key priority for the most senior management, why should anyone else invest their time and energies?
- **Training Materials:** Whether it’s books, handouts, or formal training sessions, provide some guidance to your mentors and proteges on how to get the most out of their relationships. Consider creating a place online where employees can tap into those resources at any time.
- **Patience:** A mentoring program can take a few years to show tangible results. Give it time, and keep measuring for the goals you’re trying to hit.

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Decide Why You Want a Mentor Program

Goal: Set your program up to succeed by defining goals and involving top execs.

The vast majority of mentoring programs fail because businesses don’t know what they want to get out of the effort. “When you have fuzzy program goals, you have fuzzy outcomes,” says Dr. Lois J. Zachary, author of “[Creating a Mentoring Culture](#).” Some businesses start a program to help newcomers adjust; others use it as a recruitment tool or a method of leadership grooming. IBM started its program to build knowledge, foster learning, and connect

people in a company with 386,000 employees. The culture of mentorship runs so deep that every IBM employee is either being mentored, mentoring others, or doing both. “A lot of our people work virtually, and mentoring can erase geographic and business-unit borders,” says [Sheila Forte-Trammell](#), who manages IBM’s mentoring programs.

Businesses should ensure that top management is involved in the program and in its inception, otherwise it won’t get the attention and enthusiasm it needs to become part of the business culture. “You should have their understanding and their support. That is absolutely one of the keys,” says Barry Arbuckle, CEO of MemorialCare Medical Centers, a six-hospital system in Southern California that uses mentoring as part of its development program for middle managers. The company’s chief operating officer, not human resources executives, runs the company’s mentoring and leadership program.

Essential Ingredients

Three Ways to Make Mentoring Part of Company Culture

Brand the program. Market it like you would a product, with success stories and messages from the CEO. Stress what it means to the company, such as a more resilient workforce, more creativity, and more knowledge sharing. IBM emphasizes a “give back, reach back, and pull through” culture, where mentoring is an expectation of all employees and vital for collaboration, innovation, and maintaining institutional knowledge.

Provide access to education. Hold seminars on mentoring and host networking events that encourage people to find their own mentors. IBM offers mentoring teleconferences, panel discussions led by executives, and even “speed mentoring” sessions, similar to speed dating.

Make it everyone’s job. Make being a protege part of a bigger leadership training program and being a mentor a requirement for some kinds of job advancement. Emphasize what’s in it for the employee: continued learning, new skills, visibility, insight into business strategies and priorities. Be sure managers recognize mentoring accomplishments and allow time for the relationships.

step 2

Pair Up Proteges and Mentors

Goal: Create profiles and match people according to your goals.

Identify how many people should be mentored and who they will be. Will it be new recruits, managers, or promising young leaders? Next, create a similar profile for ideal mentors. If you hope to use the program to aid recruitment, seek out those who like teaching younger people. If your goal is to groom the next generation of leaders, then team them up with top-level managers. People who have been on the protege side before often make good mentors,

says Dawn Plimmer, the associate vice president of learning and performance at Nationwide Insurance.

How to match up promising junior talent with mentors? You can ask managers to set up matches, have human resources do it randomly, let people pick each other, or have them fill out forms and match them based on skill sets or goals. IBM relies on an online database that lets employees search for their own mentors.

At Nationwide, human resource executives found themselves over-thinking the matches according to technical discipline and personality. Now, they've made it much more random, and it works better. "We were trying to engineer the relationships," Plimmer says. "There is such a wide spectrum of things you are bringing to that relationship, and we were only looking at a couple of dimensions."

Larger businesses often encourage matches between people from different parts of the country or from different operations of the business. That removes the relationship from the traditional management chain and paves the way for cross-company knowledge exchange. For some people, the separation fosters trust more easily than a relationship between people who see each other every day. Even with no ulterior motives, Forte-Trammell says, a perfectly sincere manager can set up an apprentice for failure by blurring the distinction between assigned tasks and mentored activities. "It's penalty-free speaking," says Sharon Sadowski, an IBM product manager in Chicago who talks monthly with her mentor, Lindsay-Rae McIntyre, a human resources manager in Rochester, Minn.

Hot Tip

What's in It for Mentors?

Plan to offer some sort of recognition to those who volunteer as mentors by providing an appreciation luncheon, giving small gifts, or incorporating mentoring into their annual reviews. Companies should also remind mentors that the benefit can go both ways — whether it's understanding a different piece of the business or learning how to use Facebook. IBM's McIntyre says her protege, Sadowski, shares great information about working in the Chicago operation and dealing directly with clients, along with nuggets about what she's learned in her MBA program. "That's the best part of being a mentor," McIntyre says.

step 3

Set the Rules for Engagement

Goal: Make sure people meet regularly — and know what to talk about when they do.

Before employees launch into their mentoring relationships, help both people determine the focus and purpose of why they're doing this. Is it to develop a particular skill, create a career

plan, or orient new employees? Encourage them to share learning styles, goals, bios, and resumes to build a development plan. “Because the mentee knows what they want to get out of the relationship, it’s a good idea to let them schedule the meetings and decide what they should talk about,” Plimmer says.

Partners should also establish how often to meet and how they’ll communicate. Without that, the mentor may not build the time into his or her schedule, leaving the other person feeling frustrated. Monthly meetings that last an hour or two are pretty common, but in some more intensive mentoring relationships the partners could chat daily or weekly. To build trust, Forte-Trammell says both partners should know that nothing about the relationship is to be reported to anyone in the company and that no one will be evaluated or given a “grade.” Encourage employees to do periodic checks to be sure they’re on track to hit goals and determine if the relationship is really working.

In some cases, setting an end date can be helpful, so the two can part ways and avoid a messy and awkward “breakup.” “There is a point where you can continue the relationship or it’s time to move on and learn from someone else,” Plimmer says. Be sure those who work well together know they are free to extend the relationship if they want to. IBM’s McIntyre and Sadowski have kept their relationship going for more than four years. On the phone and over e-mail and instant message, McIntyre has walked Sadowski through several job changes within the company and provided a sounding board within a huge organization. “I can’t imagine my career without Lindsay-Rae,” Sadowski says.

Case Study

Establish an Agenda

MemorialCare Medical Centers started with loose guidelines for its mentoring program but later found it was better to have a prescribed agenda, says CEO Barry Arbuckle. The hospital network now offers assignments for each of the one- to two-hour monthly mentor meetings, complete with agendas and questions for both participants. For example, mentors are asked to talk about an ethical dilemma and how they handled it and then talk about barriers to creating change in the organization. Meanwhile, proteges must talk about their career aspirations and what leadership skills they need to develop. Later they revise their resumes and write a two-page summary of their mentor meetings. As part of the leadership program, the hospital network also requires those receiving mentorship to do research projects that the company would otherwise outsource to a consulting firm and go to their mentors for help with it.

Keep Tabs on the Program

Goal: Make sure mentoring is providing the results you want.

Although the relationships are mostly left up to participants and are best not micromanaged, businesses should keep tabs on how the program is going and check in at least once a quarter, says Les McKeown, author of *The Complete Guide to Mentoring and Coaching Program Design*, who has helped create programs for Siemens, Pella Windows and Doors, and United Technologies.

“Don’t assume no news is good news,” says **Roberta Chinsky Matuson**, president of Human Resource Solutions, based in Northampton, Mass. Measure whether your program is meeting your goals. If your goal is to increase the number of women in senior management, what do those numbers look like? If it’s to identify high fliers for promotion in the company, then be sure deserved proteges are getting promoted. Surveys or one-on-one interviews can offer feedback on training, problems, and matchmaking. To figure out if the program is helping junior employees, McKeown recommends that businesses check in with their direct managers, because they can tell better than anyone else if the relationship is working or not.

Be patient: the payoff for mentorship is hard to judge and can often take years to show results. At Memorial Care, mentoring of middle managers has paid off in succession planning. Ten years ago, when the program started, the hospital network hired internal people for top management jobs just 35 percent of the time. Today it’s up to 73 percent of the time.

Other Resources

Related Mentoring Books

Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization’s Guide by Lois J. Zachary

The Mentor’s Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships by Lois J. Zachary.

In Action: Creating Mentoring and Coaching Programs by Linda Strome.

Crisp: Mentoring, Third Edition: How to Develop Successful Mentor Behaviors by Gordon F. Shea.

The Complete Guide to Mentoring & Coaching Program Design by J. Leslie McKeown.

Coaching and Mentoring for Dummies by Marty Broustein.