

Mentoring Employees for Business Results

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published on BNET.com 5/29/2007

Mentoring is crucial to developing and retaining employees. Mentors give advice on a spectrum of topics, ranging from specific skills to broader issues of career direction. Protégés gain sound guidance, access to established networks, and enhanced personal and professional perspectives.

Though mentoring happens naturally to some degree, it can be promoted by matching seasoned employees with protégés who are new to the business or their job.

Mentoring suits smaller organizations especially well, especially if the organization is unable to afford more sophisticated employee development systems.

What You Need to Know

What is mentoring, exactly?

Mentoring is the process by which wisdom and experience are shared between two people, one of whom (the mentor) is typically senior to the other (the protégé). The advice that the mentor conveys to the protégé supports development of the protégé's skills, career, and networks.

Most of us have probably acquired our mentors more by luck than through planning, but with the erosion of traditional career ladders and the increasingly unstructured composition of business (especially small firms), individuals and companies alike are seeing great merits in this once informal relationship.

Are there limits to a mentoring relationship?

Mentoring relationships do have limits. Mentors should beware of any sense that they want to "rescue" a protégé, versus providing advice. Mentors should never try to exert undue influence in favor of a protégé. And mentors should be aware of situations in which the protégé needs professional counseling and make appropriate referrals.

What to Do

Be Aware of the Potential Scope of the Relationship

At the start of their relationship, neither the mentor nor the protégé can anticipate all the issues that they'll end up discussing. Generally, however, they discuss topics that fall into two broad categories: **career issues** and **confidence and self-awareness issues**.

Let's start with career issues:

- whether the protégé's career vision and goals seem relevant and viable
- how to “decode” the business's feedback to the protégé, for example, from an annual performance review or from a promotion received or missed
- what experience and expertise the protégé should acquire, immediately and long term
- where to find role models with whom the protégé can identify
- how the protégé should best interact with his or her manager
- whether and when the protégé should accept an internal or external job offer
- how best to promote the protégé's ideas within the department, business unit, and company
- how the protégé should react to unacceptable behavior, for example, apparent bias, favoritism, or harassment
- how to deal with the effects of a personal or family problem.

Issues of confidence and self-awareness may include:

- how the protégé can make a frank review of his or her own strengths and weaknesses
- whether feedback received by the protégé about his or her personal style is accurate
- how to overcome apparent career setbacks, or feelings of isolation or depression.

Understand Different Types of Mentoring

The four main types of mentoring are not mutually exclusive. Most people have more than one mentor, with the mentors playing complementary roles. Mentoring can be:

- **Informal**—when a more experienced person decides to take a less experienced person under wing. Such relationships form spontaneously and are usually based on a similarity of interests, expertise, or personal history. These relationships tend to grow and flourish. They often continue after one or both the people leave the business.

- **Situational**—takes place in a specific circumstance, such as when the protégé has to implement a new computer system or set up a new office. Although these relationships are often short-term, they can develop into a longer term mentoring connection.
- **Positional**—when the mentor is the manager of the protégé. While all good managers mentor their team members to some extent, this approach has natural constraints to effectiveness. The protégé may find it difficult to raise issues of switching jobs or roles. The mentor will not provide an impartial view of their relationship as superior and subordinate. And the manager may be accused of favoritism if a protégé advances more rapidly than others.
- **Formal** programs emerged during the 1990s to gain the advantages of natural mentoring while recognizing the limitations of positional mentoring.

Understand the Benefits for All Parties

Protégés are the most obvious beneficiaries of mentoring. They receive advice, guidance, access to contacts and networks, reassurance, and a broader perspective on their careers. Mentors typically strengthen their interpersonal skills, find new insights into their own work, and have the satisfaction of seeing others grow. Finally, businesses benefit through better recruitment, orientation, and retention of staff, better communication across all areas of the business, faster learning within the company, and a stronger overall culture.

Excel As a Mentor

As a mentor, you will sometimes need to be a coach, sometimes a motivator, or guide, counselor, role model, or provider of contacts. To excel in these roles, you will need to:

- help the protégé to focus his or her efforts, and to clarify personal goals
- prompt the protégé to develop effective strategies, and act as devil's advocate to challenge them
- help the protégée to identify appropriate resources, contacts, and role models
- share knowledge and wisdom based on your own experiences
- act personally as a source of inspiration and motivation, while maintaining confidentiality.

Effective mentoring approaches include techniques such as:

- asking penetrating questions to help the protégé distinguish “real” issues from apparent ones
- accepting the protégé unconditionally, asking “how” or “what” rather than “why”
- listening actively to the protégé's feelings as well as to the words
- volunteering your observations where appropriate

- avoiding the role of personal “fixer” of your mentee’s problems. Instead, help him or her learn how to develop problem-solving skills. They will help in overall development.

Excel As a Protégé

You can gain the most from the relationship if you are:

- open with your mentor about your objectives and aspirations, and also open to feedback or other observations made by your mentor. If you react defensively to your mentor’s comments, the relationship will soon wither.
- proactive in meeting with your mentor, and in relating to him or her. Arrive at your meetings fully prepared and with clear objectives, and take the lead in suggesting new ways of viewing your issues. Actively follow up on any ideas generated in the meetings, and let your mentor know of progress you make.
- considerate of the mentor’s investment of time. Identify what the mentor wants to derive from the relationship. Accommodate the mentor’s schedule when arranging meetings. Provide feedback, praise, and thanks in an appropriate way.

Understand How Mentoring Can Best Help Your Business

Larger businesses increasingly use formal programs to encourage mentoring. Compared with natural mentoring (see descriptions above), formal mentoring tends to be based on more specific objectives. It also aims at more measurable impact, such as employee retention, runs for a more limited period, typically involves discussions of more prescribed structure, and is based on pairing that is balanced more in favor of the protégé. Such programs typically aim to support employees who are new to the business or new to a role, or who are part of a group that is in some way specialized or disadvantaged.

Efforts to provide mentoring for all employees in a business rarely succeed if those efforts are based purely on formal programs. The broader objective of “mentoring for all” is best tackled as part of a wider program of cultural change, which should also examine how the company’s day-to-day business is conducted.

What to Avoid

You Don't Build the Right Program for Your Business

A mentoring program that works for another business might not work for your business. To find your best fit, you should:

- decide whether to adopt a formal program or one that includes some element of natural mentoring
- set simple criteria for people's eligibility to be protégés and mentors and for the maximum number of protégés per mentor
- decide whether protégés choose mentors (recommended), or vice versa, and establish a matching process that is seen as fair by everyone
- consider how long each relationship will last, how it can be terminated, and other features of the program
- ensure that participants respect confidentiality
- provide training for mentors and protégés and set out the expected benefits.
- determine how you will measure whether the program is working. Monitor it periodically. Reward, praise, and thank the mentors appropriately.
- make clear to potential protégés that the quality of mentoring they receive will in large measure depend on their own ability to attract mentors.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Bell, Chip R. *Managers as Mentors*. 2nd ed. McGraw-Hill, 2002.

Zachary, Lois J. *The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships*. Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Journal Article:

Reingold, Jennifer. "Want to Grow as a Leader? Get a Mentor!" *Fast Company*, #42, January 2001.

Web Site:

The Mentoring Leadership & Resource Network:www.mentors.net

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