



Make Mentoring Work

Peter Wilson
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Rating

8

- 9 Applicability
- 7 Innovation
- 8 Style

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Take-Aways

- Mentoring, which has been around nearly forever, is more popular than ever.
- Top employees expect organizations to offer mentoring to further their careers. They regard mentoring programs as essential.
- The modern motto for young workers is, “One career, many mentors.”
- Mentoring satisfies a basic human need to speak to trusted people who will listen empathetically and offer wise counsel.
- Mentoring helps mentees become leaders.
- The mentor and mentee must share similar interests and values.
- Mentors must be ethical, trustworthy, honest, open-minded and friendly.
- By word and action, mentors must communicate to mentees that they have value.
- Mentoring requires face-to-face meetings every four to six weeks.
- Most mentoring arrangements last anywhere from “12 to 18 months.”

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this abstract, you will learn: 1) What strategies will help you get the most from mentoring and be effective as a mentor and as a mentee, 2) How mentoring differs from coaching, and 3) How the four phases of mentoring proceed.

Recommendation

Now in its second edition, this guidebook by Peter Wilson, chairman of the 20,000-member Australian Human Resources Institute, remains the established go-to resource for mentors and those they mentor. Organizations depend on it when they set up mentoring programs, since today's employees expect mentoring as a basic job benefit. Wilson's manual features a fascinating historical review of mentoring, a comprehensive, detailed background overview of mentoring and easy-to-apply, how-to guidance. *getAbstract* recommends Wilson's classic to everyone involved in mentoring. It will also serve those whose organizations might wish them to become mentors or who might seek mentoring.

Summary

"Finding one's true north will often come with the help of a mentor's compass, even if it ultimately takes you onto a different career map."

"The best mentors are supportive of... mentees and always encouraging about their ability to grow further. They are also innovative or creative in their thoughts and strategies."

Ancient Mentoring

Homer's *Odyssey* relates that when Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan Wars, he entrusted his son Telemachus to his best friend, Mentor. He asked Mentor to teach Telemachus to fulfill his adult duties as king. Mentor helped Telemachus develop his "longer-term career potential."

Mentoring still follows that model and satisfies a basic human need. Especially in tough times, people need someone they can trust and talk to, someone who cares about them, asks smart questions and keeps an open mind.

Mentoring by Program

Organizations that are competing for top talent recognize the necessity of establishing a mentoring program. And, today's job applicants expect companies to offer mentoring as a job benefit. Modern corporate mentoring, designed to fulfill that need, occurs primarily as part of a planned program.

To establish a formal mentoring program, follow these guidelines:

- The person being mentored is the essential focus of any mentoring relationship.
- New mentors and those new to being mentored ("mentees") should learn the traits of a successful mentoring relationship from experienced mentors and mentees.
- Everyone should understand and share the mentoring program's objectives.
- The mentor and mentee need to be compatible as individuals and in terms of their roles in your industry.
- Mentors should help mentees push past their limitations, expand their horizons, take chances and try new things.
- The mentor and mentee need time to establish rapport.
- Both should fully commit to examining relevant issues.
- Mentoring relationships require regular monitoring.

“Today’s top workers are looking for an employer prepared to invest in their skill levels and career learning.”

“Mentoring...is structured as a means for both mentors and mentees to achieve something that is personally and professionally important.”

“Mentors need to telegraph that their purpose is to give unconditional positive support and encouragement.”

“Mentees need to... initiate and sustain productive relationships with their mentor[s].”

How Mentors Help

The mentor must establish a rapport with the mentee, and have a genuine interest in his or her professional path. Mentees must accept responsibility for taking their mentors’ advice seriously and acting upon it. Mentors can help up-and-comers in these areas:

- Managing relationships, including those with complicated or difficult personalities.
- Dealing successfully with corporate “power structures” and stakeholders.
- Becoming competent risk managers who can handle uncertainties, ambiguities, and “strategic, economic and social” contingencies.
- Discovering answers to challenging ethical and moral dilemmas.

Mentoring is a “collaborative [and ‘self-directed’] learning relationship” between people who share a mission: to assist the mentee in planning and attaining agreed upon “work, learning and career goals.” Two factors fuel successful mentoring: proper training for both parties, and a review by both mentor and mentee of their “mutually held and consistent values.”

Most people in today’s work environment will hold multiple jobs at multiple employers over the course of their careers. Their prevailing path is “one career, many mentors.”

How to Be a Great Mentor

Mentors should be honest, trustworthy and friendly. They should have extensive experience that is relevant to their mentees.

Mentors need “wisdom, credibility and patience.” They should remain positive and be capable communicators and active listeners who pay close attention to their mentees. A mentor should listen 80% of the time and talk 20% of the time. The mentor’s attitude toward his or her mentee should be “enthusiastic, relaxed” and “welcoming.”

Mentors must adhere to professional protocols and conduct. They must be willing to discuss multiple areas that concern their mentees, but they must not ever directly intervene to solve a mentee’s problems.

Mentors should be available for regular face-to-face meetings. They should shadow their mentees’ new experiences, and can suggest general approaches that mentees should try on their own. Mentors should help mentees develop important new relationships and expand their networks.

While friendly and supportive, mentors should be ready to deliver some “hard talk” if needed, say in cases when mentees begin to exhibit “avoidance behaviors” or become “blindsided on some core realities” to an extent that can interfere with the goals of the mentoring program.

Mentors also must see when their mentees no longer need help. At this stage, which often comes after 12 to 18 months, a mentor should be ready to recommend that the younger manager move ahead independently or seek some new type of assistance.

Mentoring Is Not Coaching

Coaching focuses on teaching specific performance skills. Coaches intervene directly to help employees do something better, such as give a speech or handle a negotiation.

“Mentoring is...an intergenerational learning experience between two people in an environment that is private and trusting, and which engenders confidence for the big issues to be opened up, addressed and discussed.”

“The best mentors are usually external to where a person is employed. There is one critical exception to this rule – those professions operating in harm’s way – the police and the armed forces.”

“Mentoring is a proactive bespoke art that confers rights but also places obligations on both mentor and mentee.”

“Mentoring is also about ‘life leadership.’ It’s about becoming a leader in your own life with a little help from someone who has already shown [leadership] in their own.”

Mentoring takes a broader approach. It concerns mentees’ general well-being and ability to reach their most important goals. Mentors assist and guide their mentees’ personal growth and help them make the best career choices. A mentor is a mentee’s “confidential adviser.”

Mentoring also is not sponsorship. Sponsors are persons of stature who use their influence to advance their protégé’s career. This often involves opening doors or facilitating valuable connections. Mentors can sponsor, but sponsoring is not their primary responsibility.

Mentoring works in many fields, from corporate life to government. It is notably important in “the police and armed services” where the “bonds of common experience” prove crucial. Mentoring also fulfills important needs in the world of academics.

Mentoring’s Roots

Mentoring is a carefully developed craft, not a science. It has three crucial roots:

1. **“Socratean philosophy”** – Socrates’s students revered him as a senior figure with great wisdom. Mentors similarly perform as wise elders. They share their experience and knowledge. They guide their usually younger mentees on planning their careers and lives. Plato and Aristotle, the “world’s first mentors,” also were wise elders.
2. **“Quasi-parental behavior”** – Mentors act as “surrogate parents” who help their fractious teenagers with suggestions on how to create a positive future.
3. **“Spiritual connections”** – Sometimes mentors assume the role of spiritual advisers. In these cases, they’re like prophets with strong connections to a spiritual realm.

In Australia, younger indigenous people look to their honored elders to assume these roles. These senior mentors serve as “elder philosopher[s],” proxy parents and spiritual guides.

The Gods Must Be Crazy

Mentors can help their mentees deal with disruptive personalities in the modern workplace. Some of these problem personalities resemble famous characters from Greek mythology:

- **“Nemesis”** – The colleague who is always happy to mess things up for you.
- **“Narcissus”** – This worker loves him- or herself above all else.
- **“Echo”** – This co-worker distracts you and wastes your time.
- **“Hubris”** – This person always crows about his or her accomplishments.
- **“Achilles”** – This colleague is a “self-styled Superman.”
- **“Aphrodite and Adonis”** – These co-workers are “drama queens.”
- **“Hades”** – Watch out: This associate has “an evil plan.”
- **“Chaos”** – This colleague makes lots of noise and constantly creates confusion.
- **“Calypso, Dionysus and Circe”** – These colleagues are party animals. They will divert your attention from your work.
- **“Psyche”** – This co-worker is an insufferable smarty-pants.
- **“Pandora”** – This person tries to make every little thing incredibly complicated.
- **“Medusa”** – Watch out for this scary “walking-talking head of snakes.”

“Peer Mentoring”

In classic mentor-mentee relationships, the mentor is older than the mentee. However, peer mentoring or “co-mentoring,” in which the mentors and mentees are the same age, also can be valuable. These mentors will have different talents and experiences, and each can share knowledge that may fill in gaps in the other’s education.

The Four Stages of Mentoring

Most mentoring relationships go through four phases:

1. **The mentor and mentee “get to know each other”** – At their all-important first meeting, the mentor and mentee establish trust, reliability and candor, the vital ingredients for any mentoring relationship. Mentoring is, in effect, a “large change-management program” that the mentee kick-starts.
2. **They outline their objectives** – And then they plan pathways for accomplishing these goals. The mentor should draft mentoring objectives in advance and then establish aligned goals with the mentee’s concurrence. These should be measurable stretch goals. Mentors must regularly monitor their mentee’s progress. The mentee must develop the ability to react appropriately to events and to differentiate between what is strategic and what is tactical.
3. **Mentor and mentee follow this evolving plan** – The mentee should regularly “probe the mentor.” Mentoring offers increased insights, training in how to deal with contentious issues and difficult relationships, and a comprehensive understanding of the responsibilities of senior executives. The mentor and mentee may achieve a “moment of truth” along the way.
4. **They conclude their mentoring activities** – Wrap up at the proper time, usually in 12 to 18 months.

Mentors and mentees should keep these facts and tips in mind:

- **Meeting requirements for mentoring** – Mentoring requires that the mentor and the mentee meet face-to-face every four to six weeks. Anything less frequent is not true mentoring. Periodic phone calls and emails are no substitute for this essential face-to-face contact. If the mentor and mentee get together on this schedule, they then can use phone calls and emails as acceptable mechanisms for following up on items they discussed.
- **Other forms of mentoring** – Mentoring can work in other formats besides traditional mentoring and peer mentoring. “Needs-based mentoring” involves a network of various mentors with differentiated skills who share their knowledge and expertise with a specific mentee. “Cross-cultural” mentoring helps mentees develop a better understanding of diverse cultural communities. Some professional organizations promote mentoring programs in their specialty areas. For example, Financial Executives International of Australia sponsors a mentoring program for up-and-coming chief financial officers. The Australian Human Resources Institute developed a mentoring program for its members.
- **Mentee characteristics** – Mentees must be “proactive and flexible,” do their homework and be willing to relinquish some degree of control. Mentees should reveal who they really are and shouldn’t conceal their true personality.
- **The mentor should be aware of the mentee’s psychological needs** – This involves examining “the mentee’s fears” and what causes them. The mentor needs to develop strategies to help the mentee eliminate these fears over the course of the mentoring relationship.

“Modern workers are looking for strong ethical characteristics in those who lead them. It’s also a major precondition to be an effective contemporary mentor.”

“Listening to how the challenges of the mentee would have been handled at a similar stage in the mentor’s own working life is hugely powerful.”

Good mentors help “you to walk in your own shoes, even if you start out just wanting to walk in theirs.”

About the Author

Peter Wilson, national president (chairman) of the Australian Human Resources Institute Ltd., is secretary-general of the World Federation of People Management Associations.