Organizational Culture & Employee Engagement

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How to Set Up an Effective Mentoring Program

By Heidi Holmes

Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, Barbara Walters and Oprah Winfrey. Larry Summers and Sheryl Sandberg. Warren Buffet and Bill Gates.

Much more than pairings of famous and successful people who revolutionized their fields, this list highlights the importance of mentoring. And the mentees’ own recollections testify to how having a good mentor benefited them.

Steve Jobs mentored Mark Zuckerberg, which the Facebook CEO acknowledged publicly by thanking Jobs “for being a mentor and a friend.” Barbara Walters helped out Oprah to such an extent that Winfrey once told Walters in an interview, “Had there not been you, there never would have been me.”

So, it should be obvious that making the right connection can change a life. This is why it astounds me that even though the demand for mentoring has exploded, particularly among millennials whose key values include meaningful work and flexibility, more employers do not actively invest in mentorship programs.

The resulting problem is that not everyone can access the right connections. What most organizations do not realize is that mentoring takes more than just putting two people together and hoping that the relationship is mutually beneficial. Forming a strong teacher-student-like mentoring relationship takes active investment and a keen interest in connecting people from the bottom to the very top of the organization in meaningful and organized ways so that everyone has a chance to work with someone who will, in some way, open up their world.

Why Mentoring Programs Are Essential

The way we work has fundamentally changed, and it is no longer incumbent upon a single person (usually a manager or boss) to solve an employee’s problems. Succeeding in nearly all roles requires assembling one’s own personal advisory board in order to access experience and insight from the right person at the right time.

At an organization level, employers that properly connect their people and foster a mentoring culture see more engagement across their workforces and experience lower staff turnover. With research
from my company showing that 71 percent of workers are not engaged and everyone believing that keeping one job for life has become unrealistic, giving workers someone they can speak with about their professional future may just save an organization tens of thousands (or millions) of dollars in hiring and retraining costs.

The fact is, quality mentoring programs make for more engaged and happy employees, and employees rate the importance of having a mentor highly.

At a macro level, we need to build a society in which, with experience have a clear way to impart expertise to new members of the workforce. Building and maintaining reciprocal professional relationships is an effective mechanism for that. It is also especially important at a time when mentoring is becoming a more fluid experience. Rather than the traditional concept of a hierarchy in which elders impart knowledge to lucky proteges, the modern view of effective mentoring is of something that is more reciprocal, an ongoing conversation during which mentors and mentees exchange ideas while broadening their worldviews and ways of thinking.

Increasingly, mentors are realizing that they have something to learn and gain from the experience that makes the relationship every bit as rewarding for them as it is for their mentees. It is no longer just about giving back, but about gaining greater insight into a different generation or culture, enhancing communication and leadership skills, and expanding their network.

The very act of giving advice or sharing early experiences often helps mentors remember and relearn lessons. Being a mentor also allows those who may be disadvantaged based on gender, race, disability or some other characteristic a chance to advance their careers more quickly as they feel more valued, gain seniority and learn to act as leaders. For example, my company has found that an employer’s mentorship program is highly correlated with women’s overall satisfaction and happiness at work.

**Get Started**

The first step involves thinking about what mentoring means and considering how mentoring will fit into the current cultural model of the organization. While doing this, keep in mind that mentoring has typically been seen through a hierarchical lens as a top-down transfer of wisdom from one expert to an inexperienced, yet promising protege. Mentoring has also usually been reserved for individuals earmarked for success—the high potentials. This model has been made outdated by flattening work structures and people staying around for less time than it takes to become experts in the traditional sense. It has also not proven to be scalable.

Thinking about mentoring as something more accessible and relevant to all types of workers widens the talent pool and allows people to connect based on what they need help with right now rather than on expectations of what could happen years down the line.

Once the concept is embraced, building a good, inclusive and scalable mentoring program requires thoughtful planning and commitment from organizational leaders. Below are some tips that will help get any organization started.

**Make sure everyone is on board.** For the program to produce optimal results, everyone in the organization, from senior management all the way to the front line, should be convinced of the value of mentoring. They must understand that working with people from different departments and levels will benefit everyone in terms of gaining skills and knowledge needed to perform well and to advance in their careers.

**Map out a framework before matching mentors with mentees.** Once senior management buys in, take time to set program goals and develop methods for measuring success.

**Pair mentors and mentees with care.** Match partners based on what they want to learn, their interests and where they want to go in their careers. The quality of a match will determine the outcomes, and making good matches increases participants’ satisfaction.

**Monitor and manage.** Establish check-in points to identify participants who have not yet communicated or are lacking engagement. When problems exist, figure out why. Administer satisfaction and pulse surveys, and then act on the findings. Annually, prepare program reports to assess progress toward goals and to inform the goal-setting process.

**Don’t force it.** Life happens. A mentor or mentee must be able to withdraw from participation without penalty when changes in their workload, personal issues or some other reason makes maintaining the relationship impractical. Have a mechanism in place for rematching mentors and mentees.

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