

## Mentoring vs. Coaching

In 2006 Sun Microsystems conducted a survey to assess the effectiveness of the company's mentoring program. It found that 25% of employees who took part in the program had a salary grade change, compared to only 5% amongst those who did not participate. In addition, 28% of participating mentors had a salary increase, compared to only 5% of non-participating mentors. One possible reason? Participants were 20-25% more likely to stay at Sun.

When effective, mentoring can improve employee retention, build morale, reduce stress, build teams, increase commitment, and accelerate leadership development. With statistical data showing obvious support for a mentoring system, why are formalized programs not more prevalent? Actually, industry surveys have reported that 72% of companies have initiated mentoring programs. The problem is not a lack of systematic mentoring programs, but may lie in how they were set-up and participant's expectations of the program.

### The Set-Up

A mentoring program designed today and implemented tomorrow is going to fail 100% of the time. Lois J. Zachary, president of Phoenix, Arizona based Leadership Development Services, suggests that leaders "think systematically and create mentoring cultures rather than opting for the more expedient route of running a (mentoring) program." It needs to be well thought out and consider several aspects, including:

- pairing employees - grouping people by job responsibilities and ignoring personalities, sensibilities, and personal background won't work
- who can mentor - not all senior employees will have a natural ability to mentor, and all mentors should receive additional training
- congruence with company goals - telling employees to forge mentoring relationships but then begrudging the time they spend away from their desks doing so sends a convoluted message
- clear program goals - unrealistic expectations by program managers and participants can kill the program. SMART program goals should be communicated clearly prior to the beginning of the program.
- how to evaluate effectiveness - clear channels of communication help to ensure continual feedback on what is and isn't working.

Even after the initial planning phase, mentoring programs can fail, or be ignored, if the initiative is strictly top to bottom and employees don't buy into the system and understand the benefit to themselves as well as their organization.

### The Fall

Mentoring is descendent from a long line of master-apprentice relationships (the English word mentor comes from Homer's Odyssey - the goddess Athena disguised herself as Mentor, an elderly man who guided and advised Telemachus while his father,

Odysseus, was away). A young man would apprentice himself to an older, more experienced master to learn technical and business skills. Career changes were uncommon, so there wasn't much fear that the young apprentice would take his hard-earned advice to a competitor.

Flash forward to today, and it's not uncommon for young professionals to bounce around from one company to the next. It's easy to understand why older executives, the "in my day" crowd, might find mentoring futile and opt out of their company's set-up.

That's short sighted (hey! they're old, give them a break). Mentoring programs provide additional benefits to mentors. They can become reenergized professionally and gain exposure to new, diverse perspectives that challenge routine thought processes. In addition, new technological and computer innovations are being developed and introduced into the workplace at a lightning-quick pace. Seasoned veterans are less likely to embrace and apply them in their work. A high level manager could benefit from a mentoring relationship with a younger, tech-savvy co-worker as the mentor sometimes becomes the mentee.

### **The Nitty Gritty**

Now that everyone is onboard and excited about the idea, what actually should go on in a mentoring relationship? As mentioned earlier, if the program is initiated by the company, it's imperative for program managers to set guidelines and manage expectations.

A mentor's influence is proportionate to the perceived value they bring to the relationship. The primary benefit inherent in a mentor is their knowledge of the industry and their intimate, typically long-term, relationship with the company. They have been there, seen that, and can offer solutions based upon a long history of triumphs and failures. Katherine Klein, a management professor at Penn's Wharton Business School, says mentors provide, "a sounding board and a place where it's safe to be vulnerable and get career advice". Mentors also help employees to become acclimated to an organization's culture and politics.

### **The Exception**

Carl is a middle manager at a large multi-national company who has been delegated the task of presenting his department's year-end numbers to the company's COO. In order to gain an added advantage, Carl decides to increase the effectiveness of his presentation by practicing his delivery and finding a way to get the COO more involved in the presentation. Carl consults with his mentor, and discovers that the COO was an Olympic gymnast at a younger age, so Carl uses gymnastics metaphors to gain rapport. Could Carl's mentor help to hone his delivery skills? Not necessarily.

When an individual needs help enhancing a particular skill area or behavior trait, coaching is required; and not all mentors have the necessary skills to be a coach. In his book Coaching and Mentoring, Nigel MacLennan helps distinguish the difference, "A mentor can never be a coach unless they deliberately adopt the skills involved in

successful coaching... The coach concentrates on helping the performer learn how to achieve more. The mentor's aim is to be available for the (employee) to use as a resource."

### **The Coach**

This is an important distinction to make. The most effective mentors also apply coaching techniques in their relationship, but it would be unfair to expect a mentor to affect a change without first ensuring that they were qualified to do so. Mentoring provides technical expertise, a supportive environment, and insights into company culture and unwritten rules of the organization; all of which can be acted upon or ignored. There isn't a specific performance objective. Coaching, on the other hand, has an end result and a certain amount of time to achieve it.

In order to help the individual reach their goal, coaches do not need to have the specialized expertise in areas other than coaching. But they must have a track record of success in helping individual reach their goals. Ideally, the individual chooses how to reach their goal while the coach is strategically monitoring, assessing, and giving advice on effectiveness and efficiency. A coach's role is to provide structure, foundation, and support so that the individual being coached begins to self-generate results. They inquire rather than share answers, and use what they have found out about the individual to provide customized feedback on what the person needs to do to become more successful.

Ultimately, deciding whether to implement a mentoring program comes down to expected results. If they are knowledge-based, the kind of knowledge that comes from long-term employees, then a mentoring program could be a valuable tool in reaching that goal. If the goals have a skills-based element, then it is important to the long-term health of the mentoring program to determine whether the participating mentors have the ability to assist their mentees or if they would be better served by a external coach.

#### **Document used in the preparation of this article include:**

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