

The Working Life: The Importance of Workplace Mentors

By Mary Abbajay

Most adults can identify a person who had a significant and positive impact on them. Whether it was a teacher, a coach, a boss, a scoutmaster or a parent, chances are that someone, somewhere along the line acted as a mentor to you. Today, more and more businesses are embracing the concept of mentoring as a professional development tool. Through mentoring, organizations are seeing dramatic improvements in efficiency, productivity and, of course, the passing of institutional knowledge and leadership skills from one generation to the next.

An time tested method

Mentoring is one of the oldest forms of influence and knowledge sharing. It started with the Ancient Greeks; Mentor was Odysseus' trusted counselor and advisor. Mentoring is when one individual actively and willingly passes his/or knowledge and wisdom onto another person.

A mentor is an individual—usually older, but always more experienced--who helps and guides another individual's development. This guidance is done without the expectation of personal or monetary gain on the mentor's part. Mentors can be friends, relatives, coworkers, teachers, supervisors, etc. There is no official title.

Mentoring vs Coaching

Because both mentoring and coaching have become popular tools in the field of employee development, the two are often confused. While both utilize many of the same skills, being a mentor implies some specific organizational or industry knowledge that helps guide the protégé's career. Coaching, on the other hand, is more about bringing an objective process to help someone articulate and achieve his goals.

In general, to be a coach, one does not need particular organizational or industry expertise and, in fact, most coaching is more about personal perspective and personal impact than specialized knowledge. Coaches are process experts. Mentors are task experts. Coaching is about skill development. Mentoring is about skill development AND specialized knowledge transfer. When done correctly, it's a powerful double whammy.

Why mentoring is important

Mentoring is a tool that organizations can use to nurture and grow their people, and it's gaining in popularity. As organizations strive to retain hard earned experience and wisdom, they are turning to mentoring programs as a form of interpersonal knowledge management. Protégés observe, question and explore, while mentors demonstrate, explain and model.

I know that coaching is big thing in organizations today. While coaching can definitely help individuals become better leaders and managers, it doesn't really tap into the collective wisdom of people who have succeeded inside specific organizations or industries.

Mentoring, on the other hand, can help employees navigate organizational culture, solve problems and advance their careers. Mentoring is a great way to make sure the talent pipeline is filled with people ready to manage and lead.

Additionally, organizations are using mentoring as a way to retain and recruit talent. As Generation Y hits the workforce in huge numbers, mentoring has become a key tool for both recruiting and retention.

What makes a good mentor

A good mentor needs to be more than just a successful individual. A good mentor must also have the disposition and desire to develop other people. Great mentors must be able to both “talk the talk” and “walk the walk.”

Being a good mentor requires more than just experience. It requires a willingness to reflect and share on one’s own experiences, including one’s failures. Great mentors are often those who are constantly trying to learn themselves. Essential qualities for an effective mentor include:

- A desire to develop and help others. A good mentor is sincerely interested in helping someone else without any “official” reward. Good mentors do it because they genuinely want to see someone else succeed.
- Commitment, time and energy to devote to the mentoring relationship.
- Current and relevant knowledge, expertise, and/or skills.
- A willingness to share failures and personal experiences. Mentors need to share both their “how to do it right” and their “how I did it wrong” stories. Both experiences provide valuable opportunities for learning.
- A learning attitude. The best teachers have always been and always will be those who remain curious about learning. Because a mentor is more like a teacher than a coach, this becomes an important characteristic in a mentor. Would you rather be advised by someone whose mind is shut

(because he knows all) or by someone whose mind is open because he is always looking to deepen his knowledge?

- A skill in developing others. This includes the very real skills of listening, asking powerful questions and being able to tell stories, which includes personal anecdotes, case examples and honest insight.

What makes a good protégé?

Just as there are specific characteristics of a successful mentor, there are attributes that make a good protégé. And this is important, because protégés must remember that mentors are doing this from the goodness of their heart, so being a good protégé is the best way to ensure the relationship enjoys a healthy purposeful existence.

Protégé’s need to be:

- Committed to expanding their capabilities and focused on achieving professional results.
- Willing to ask for help.
- Open and receptive to learning and trying new ideas.
- Able to accept feedback—even constructive criticism—and act upon it.
- Willing to experiment and apply what they learn back on the job.
- Able to communicate and work cooperatively with others.
- Be personally responsible and accountable.
- Ready, willing and able to meet on a regular basis.

How to make it a success

Mentoring is a joint venture. Successful mentoring requires that both parties share responsibility for learning and sustaining the relationship.

Successful mentoring begins with initiating the relationship, and then, to steal a coaching term, “designing the alliance.” This means all parties need to be

clear about what this relationship is going to look like and how it will be managed. Mentor and protégé should discuss things like:

- Contact and response times
- Meetings
- Confidentiality
- Focus
- Feedback
- Goals and accountability

Mentoring vs Managing

Very often, in a formal mentoring relationship, your mentor may not be your supervisor or even in the same chain of command. But this doesn't have to pose a conflict, as long as everyone is clear about their roles and expectations. The manager's role in employee development is always paramount and should not be replaced or modified by an employee's participation in a mentoring program. Mentoring is an additional and supplemental development tool for organizations, while a manager's essential role is to support the professional learning process while also monitoring an employee's performance.

Managers fulfill a stewardship role in terms of day-to-day direct authority and capacity building, while mentors provide a broader and longer view that creates a path to the future. Effective and confident managers should take an active interest in the mentoring process through endorsing experimentation in a way that applauds new approaches and permits the possibility of mistakes. Good managers will also support and design learning assignments in partnership with the mentor and protégé.

If enrolled in a formal mentoring relationship, it is always a good idea to respect the differences between a supervisor and a mentor and to openly discuss potential pitfalls.

Finding a Mentor

There are lots of ways to find a mentor. Check with your company first; they may have a program or an organization in mind. You can also check out professional trade associations and groups like SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives.



The best place to look for a mentor, however, is right in front of you. Look around your workplace or your industry. Who do you admire and respect? Who has always impressed you with their insight and perceptiveness? And finally, who do you feel drawn to?

Consider your boss. Or your boss's boss. Consider executives in other divisions. Consider older individuals who may not be top executives but who have tons of experience. Approach that individual and ask if they would consider being your mentor. Let them know why you selected them and what you hope to learn from them.

It is really key to align your goals with their expertise and experience. Be prepared to talk about what the relationship might look like and how much time might be involved. There is a big difference between meeting someone for lunch on a quarterly basis versus a weekly phone call. Be clear what you want out of the mentoring process and structure your relationship accordingly.


Don't put it off. What can you lose? Even if they decline to be your mentor, and few will, they will be flattered that you asked.

Starting a mentoring program

Finally, if you or your company is interested in instituting a formal mentoring program, it is important to, yes, find a mentor for the process. Research other programs, talk to other executives and find the one that fits your company.

When you have your program in place, remember to be flexible and inclusive when matching the mentor and protégée. The right mentor may not always be the first person you think of. It is also important to ensure that participants really want to do this! It can't be a "box" they check off; they have to have a genuine interest (and the aforementioned skill set) to participate.

You should also provide some skill building and structure, especially in the introductory phase. And be prepared to support the program with best practices. Finally, don't forget to evaluate the program and incorporate the feedback. You want the program to be successful and worthwhile, so it needs to be given careful time and attention.



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