

SMART MENTORING: When Skilled Employees Share Their Knowledge, Your Department Wins

by Phillip Perry MA



If you're like most managers, you spend lots of time training people in policies and procedures. And why not? A talented, well oriented staff can boost productivity and make life easier for everyone. Sooner or later, though, even your best employees walk out the door, carrying with them all their hard-won expertise.

But hold on: You can stem that loss. Keep your valuable intellectual assets in house through a mentoring program that transfers skills from senior employees to junior ones.

"Capturing knowledge in the workplace is especially critical today, given the nation's demographic shift," points out Linda Phillips-Jones, principal consultant at The Mentoring Group, Grass Valley, Calif. "Thousands of baby boomers are about to retire. By having mentoring in place your more skilled people can pass on their knowledge in a structured way."

Mentoring is essentially the pairing of two individuals, one of whom needs to acquire the expertise possessed by the other. While the process is similar to coaching, mentoring targets more subtle skills requisite to the enhancement of career potential. Examples are: dealing with patients and colleagues in productive and sensitive ways that encourage cooperation and team effort; cultivating a creative mind-set that produces profitable ideas for the organization; and applying oneself in ways that go beyond the job description into the area of power performance.

Both sides win

Smart mentoring does more than lock in good talent: It also motivates participants. Mentors enjoy ego boosts when they

make a difference in other people's lives. After all, everyone appreciates recognition for hard-won talents. Mentees, for their part, enjoy greater control over the reins of their careers. Indeed, mentoring can be a valuable recruitment tool, says Phillips-Jones: "Employers are saying, 'If you join us we will match you up with a mentor.' And students are starting to ask potential employers what mentoring programs they have in place." Given the benefits, no wonder mentoring is growing. "It's amazing how fast interest is increasing," says Phillips-Jones. "Today most organizations have programs going on."

Starting a program

So how about you? Got your own mentoring program? Here's some advice on how to start one that really works:

Tip #1: Start small. Avoid getting in over your head with a large formal mentoring program. Getting too ambitious may backfire when bungled efforts disappoint employees. "Start with just a few people who are enthusiastic about the idea," suggests Phillips-Jones. "Then the program will be easier to sell to others."

Phillips-Jones suggests launching the effort with several brown-bag lunches during which you talk about mentoring and how it helps both parties, encouraging individuals to volunteer.

Starting small will also obviate knee-jerk reactions from those cynical employees who might view the effort as just the latest management fad to come down the road. Seeing real results will help everyone accept mentoring as the way of the future.

Tip #2: Lead the way. Employees tend to take their cues from top management. That truism applies no less to mentoring than to daily work habits. "If top leadership sets an example it will have a tendency to filter down," says Thomas W. Morris III, president of the Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm Morris Associates. "So if you want to get a successful mentoring program going, find your own mentoring team mate and start doing by example. If you do it others will see it."

The worst way to launch a mentoring initiative, says Morris, is to dictate its formation in your work place and bow out. Employees will not invest in a program which has received only lip-service from the organization's leadership. On the contrary, they will view mentoring as a gimmick and its requisite meetings and reporting mechanisms as irritating chores.

Who can you select as a mentoring teammate? That can be sticky, given the isolation so often experienced by top managers. The trick is to remember that successful mentoring is often a two-way street, and the ability of the mentors and mentees to switch roles is particularly critical when a top manager is involved.

"While a president or CEO often has no one on a peer level, a good leader ought to be able to learn from subordinates," says Morris. Consider teaming up with your organization's technical, legal or human resources person. Any of these individuals can mentor you on some aspects of your operation about which you may have less than complete knowledge. Conversely, you can mentor these individuals on leadership and communication skills which will help them grow beyond their specialties.

Once you have established a successful mentoring relationship you will be able to communicate your enthusiasm to your

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employees. Start jawboning about how mentoring has helped your own career, then put your resources behind it: Let everyone know that you will provide guidance on best practices and will modify job descriptions to coordinate the activity.

Tip #3 Pick great mentors. Not everyone makes a good mentor. Throughout your organization's mentoring adventure, but especially in its early stages, you need to identify mentors who will energize the program with enthusiasm and drive. Ask if each prospective mentor has the expertise required by the mentee, the time requisite for a successful relationship, the ability to help others succeed and an interest in doing so.

"The unbreakable criterion for a mentor is profound listening skills," says Michael Shenkman, an Albuquerque, N.M.-based mentoring consultant. "What I mean by that is not just listening for what a person says but also for what the person doesn't say." Good mentors, says Shenkman, understand the subtleties present in what people say and the way they say it. "Picking up all the subtleties is the stock in trade of a mentor."

Too, says Shenkman, mentors should have a certain worldliness. "I look for people who have been out in the world and have traveled," he says. "And they should be widely read beyond what is required in their fields. I look for people who have an ability to pursue their own internally driven interests."

Underlying all of these criteria, says Shenkman, should be enthusiasm for the mission at hand: "Mentors have to really care and their task has to matter to them intensely."

Successful programs usually follow these ground rules:

- Clarify expectations in advance. Answer these questions: How many hours will the mentoring encompass (Note that many mentoring relationships require as little as two hours a month)? How often will we meet, and where? What are the specific goals of the mentoring relationship? When will the relationship end?

- Emphasize self-direction. Mentees should be encouraged to manage the relationship, setting their own goals in conjunction with the mentor.

- Think short term. Traditionally, mentoring relationships lasted years. The trend today is to establishing more specific goal-oriented relationships that last only weeks or months.

- Think multiple mentors. There's no reason to confine mentoring to a single relationship. Since multiple people offer a variety of new skills, match them with appropriate mentees.

- Establish a departure protocol. Participants feel unsatisfied if the relationship dribbles away on its own. Plan for a final meeting in which the relationship is formally terminated and the mentee provides a report on what was learned.

Build to last

The mentoring movement is one element of a larger environment in which people are leaving their comfort zones and reaching out to others. When a program clicks the right way, people enjoy participating. "Mentors give glowing testimonials about how they are thrilled to help others," says Phillips-Jones. "And mentees learn new skills more quickly than they could from formal training."

It all sounds like a win-win situation, not only for the individuals involved but also for the employer. "When effective mentoring is in place people feel more valued, and that builds employee loyalty," says Phillips-Jones.

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