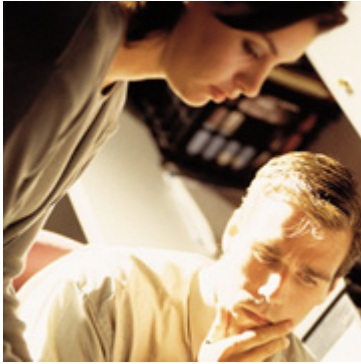


Developing an effective mentoring program

Mentoring programs support the goal of employee retention and can make it easier to transition new employees into the core organization. With the right approach, any organization can benefit

By Marcus Miller



Mentoring is no longer seen as 'nice to have,' as organizations scramble to find ways to develop and retain their workforce. Such programs needn't be complex to bring real value to the new hire, the mentor, and the business as a whole.

The mentor's role is to teach and advise new employees. By starting new hires off on the right foot and showing them the ropes, they can integrate smoothly into their new jobs. With this support, a new employee has an increased level of self-confidence and is less likely to stumble. The mentor may teach missing skills, impart specialized knowledge and expertise and ultimately provide a forum for feedback and communications within the organization.

The mentor has a special role in the organization. In return for their contribution, the mentor receives positive recognition for their leadership from both the new hire and the employer. This should lead to increased job satisfaction. Mentors also benefit by honing their technical skills and receiving new information or ideas. Overall, it's a two-way street for growth.

For the employer, a mentoring program accelerates a new employee's understanding and perspective of the organization. This effort to connect people engenders staff loyalty, since lines of communication are opened up and people watch out for each other's well being. A mentoring program protects your investment in the new hire and directly affects employee retention.

Mentoring takes time – but not a lot

To launch and run a successful mentoring program first requires the CEO's enthusiasm and endorsement, otherwise the program will be seen as a 'feel good' process and isn't likely to be taken seriously. A well-planned mentoring program can change your culture for the better, while a poorly designed one can create more problems than it's worth.

Successful mentoring doesn't just happen. Participation works best on a voluntary basis, yet people are reluctant to volunteer. The first step is to develop a selection of potential mentors by asking people in the organization to nominate mentors and asking volunteers to nominate others. Compile a large pool of potential mentors so you can match the right profiles. Matching is absolutely critical and it means taking the time to consider how a mentor can complement your new employee's personality, professional experience and future professional development.

Training basics

Training is an integral part of a successful mentoring program. By taking the time to train mentors, you set a clear understanding of their roles and expectations. Training could include reflective interviewing, effective listening and questioning skills, coaching, techniques for giving and receiving feedback, goal setting, conflict handling and negotiations.

Training the protégé ensures a common understanding of the program. The training includes giving feedback and clear goal setting. With this investment in training, both sides can manage and direct the relationship.

The training agenda depends on the protégé's background, the demands of the organization and the skills

needed to achieve success. Overall encouragement and nurturing are universal themes. Encouragement is the process of recognizing someone's attributes, verbalizing them in the context of the job, and then creating action items to further expand or develop these characteristics. Similarly, nurturing ideas or relationships demonstrates a willingness to show another person that you genuinely care. A good mentor will wait to advise until asked and a good protégé won't become too dependent on advice.

Implementation strategies

Discussions are essential and should focus on learning and how to improve performance. Ensure that these feedback sessions are a dialogue in which the protégé has the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions. Offer positive feedback on issues that the new hire has handled well first, then move to the areas where development is still required. Finish with a discussion of another area in which the new hire has performed well.

A mentoring program can be combined with a new hire orientation process. New hire orientation not only prepares new employees for their job, but also inspires them for success and pride in the company. By integrating a mentoring program with the introduction process, companies combine new hire goal setting, metrics and professional development into one program that measures and reports progress at the important milestones of the 30, 90 and 180-day review periods.

As a word to the wise, keep a mentor program flexible between formal and informal events. The key benefits are derived from the one-on-one sessions — too much reporting or bureaucracy will kill it. But at the same time use a structured process with clear and concise records of meetings and dates. Progress needs to be recorded to provide an indication of what needs to be done by the next review period. Meetings should be regularly scheduled, and take at least one hour. Meeting frequency will need fine-tuning, but monthly meetings are recommended and bi-weekly meetings are more useful during new hire orientation and succession.

Tailor your mentoring program to the characteristics of your organization and your new employees. You may want to include the mentor in the performance review process and annual career planning discussions.

Women, minorities and the glass ceiling

In some cases, companies invest in mentoring programs to retain and develop high-performing women or minorities. This can make a difference in building a strong, diverse organization. When you examine the ranks of middle management today, the number of women and minorities are at an all time high. These previously under-represented groups play a significant role in the process of an organization yet their absence from the executive level positions — the glass ceiling — continues to be striking.

Executive mentoring has been the traditional approach for grooming up-and-coming employees for the executive suite. But this informal approach hasn't consistently delivered diverse profiles. To change the outcome and to tap into new and varied resources, companies are using a structured corporate mentoring program to ensure that all employees are given the opportunity to excel and grow. This may be worth considering for your organization.

Building employee connections

Connections are a major reason people stay with organizations and a mentoring program is all about people connecting with people. In the constantly changing work environment, knowledge workers need to link to others in the organization to get their jobs done. People are looking for someone who can be a critical listener and can deliver frank comments. A mentoring program breaks down barriers and employees feel they can really express themselves and ask the critical questions that affect their daily work.

As a final comment, no mentoring program is perfect. A mentoring program is like any other company program — it's dependant on the human element, where mistakes are inevitably made. The success metrics of a mentoring program should measure the learning experience of all involved and the long-term improvement in employee performance, skills development and employee retention.

and develop the right people.

5 tips for making mentoring effective

1. Select potential mentors

Develop a selection of potential mentors by asking people in the organization to nominate mentors and asking volunteers to nominate others. Compile a large pool so you can match the right profiles.

2. Train the mentors and mentees

Training is an integral part of a successful mentoring program. By taking the time to train mentors and mentees, you clarify their roles and your expectations.

3. Make meetings discussions

Ensure that feedback sessions are a dialogue in which the protégé has the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions as well. Offer positive feedback on issues that the new hire has handled well first, then move to more challenging areas. Finish with a discussion of another area in which the new hire has performed well.

4. Keep it flexible

Too much bureaucracy can kill a mentoring program, but do take the time to set goals and expectations for the next mentoring session. Also, make sure that one-on-one mentoring meetings happen regularly — this is where the greatest benefit occurs.

5. Tailor it to your organization

There's no one-size-fits-all approach in structuring a mentoring program. Understand how it best fits with your business development.
