

Everyone Wins in a Mentoring Relationship

Mentoring is for your exceptional employees, people who show promise but need help to become top performers.

As a mentor, your responsibilities are to represent the company's values, give pep talks, offer instruction about your company's political structure, influence decision makers to help your mentee, and provide contacts and resources.

What's in It for You?

Mentoring doesn't just help your employees. You too reap considerable benefits from the relationship.

A mentoring relationship shortens your employees' learning curves and increases productivity.

It builds loyalty. Your efforts tell staff members that you care about them beyond their ability to do their jobs. They will be less likely to leave your company if you are helping them develop professionally. This reduces turnover.

Mentoring helps communicate corporate values. If you explain to your mentee how important these values are to the company's success, that person might come up with ideas for achieving them. The result is a more innovative environment.

Your mentees can offer you additional corporate information from their own contacts in the company. And they may be able to keep you informed about concerns within your own work group.

They can help you complete some of your own projects, freeing you to pursue other ideas that may enhance the company's bottom line.

Your mentees will prove allies in the future as they advance their own careers and gain influence within the company.

Becoming a Mentor

Think about the people on your staff. Do you have an employee who is talented but needs to acquire more skills to move forward, or someone

who has good ideas but needs an advocate to realize them? Does a newly hired staff member need a better understanding of corporate values or your division's mission?

Perhaps one of these individuals has asked you to become a mentor. Or, the idea could come from you. Before you agree to, or suggest, a

mentoring relationship, consider your chances of success.

Draw two columns on a sheet of paper. In one column, list the skills, abilities, knowledge, amount of attention and time you are willing to give to the relationship.

Bear in mind that people tend to underestimate their volume of work and overestimate their free time, so reduce by at least one-third your estimate of how much time you have to give the mentee.

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Now list your prospective mentee's needs in the second column. Examine this list first.

Eliminate any sporadic needs or spur-of-the-moment occasions on which you were asked for help. Perhaps you once quickly reviewed a speech the individual prepared.

The remaining items on the list should be developmental needs.

These demand a greater commitment from you.

Now look at your own list of resources. Draw lines from column to column,

linking your competencies with the employee's needs. Use a yellow marker to indicate needs you don't have the skills or time to address.

The more linkages there are between your employee's needs and your competencies, the more productive the mentorship will be. If yellow marks outnumber linkages, however, the person would be better off mentoring with someone else. ☆

Bob and Faith: How Mentoring Works

Faith left a secretarial position to sign on as administrative assistant to Bob, head of purchasing. Faith had been unhappy with her previous job because she hadn't felt appreciated.

Bob recognized Faith's potential. Her professional track record, although mostly clerical, indicated she was capable of taking on more responsibility than the administrative assistant position required.

He started assigning projects that gave her an opportunity to stretch. Each time Faith excelled.

Pleased with her progress, Bob offered to help Faith advance in her job. In effect, he became her mentor.

He promised to put her in charge of several projects of her own, assignments that would make her more promotable in the future. He identified several skills she would have to develop to handle the work and of-

fered to help her if she encountered difficulties.

Faith was delighted. She agreed to meet with Bob on a regular basis to provide updates on her work and accept feedback. And she set about acquiring the skills she needed.

The mentoring relationship gave Bob time to work on other projects as Faith increasingly took on work he didn't have time to do. As a result, he was able to complete a reorganization plan for his department, saving the company \$100,000.

For her part, Faith became an increasingly skilled worker. At one point, she uncovered a vendor scam that would have cost the division more than \$50,000.

When, two years later, Faith accepted a job in other city, Bob helped her get the job. This time, though, she was management. ☆

Develop Open, Honest Communications

Mentoring must become a part of your schedule; it can't be done sporadically. Meeting with your mentee once or twice a month will give you a chance to stay abreast of progress and offer timely suggestions.

Talking with Your Mentee

The key to opening a mentoring discussion is to give the mentee an idea of what you intend to discuss. For instance, you might remark about a political issue that affects a project on which your mentee is involved.

Don't open with a question, particularly one that begins with "why." "Why" questions make people feel like they have to justify their actions.

Do use thought-provoking questions during the discussion to help your mentee consider how he or she might handle certain issues. And do offer more feedback than advice. Advice isn't a learning exercise.

By contrast, feedback is instructive. Make it clear you believe the mentee would have discovered and addressed the problem without your

assistance.

Give feedback in a straightforward and honest manner, the way you probably would like someone to assess your own actions.

Avoid being hypercritical, but don't hold back constructive feedback because you're afraid of hurting the person's feelings.

Share your own experiences, failures as well as successes. This will help your mentee anticipate problems that might arise. But give your mentee the freedom to do things his or her own way.

Finally, always follow up on tasks that you've assigned. You need to know what's happening, both the good and the bad.

Trust Is Critical

You must be able to trust that the other person will be open and honest with you. Your mentee, in turn, must trust that you will be honest about any problems that arise and will keep all conversations confidential.

Mentoring won't work without this mutual trust and respect. ☆

Measure Your Skills

The following questions will help you assess your ability to communicate with your mentee:

Do you interrupt with solutions before someone has finished explaining the problem?

Do you tell people what to do rather than questioning to help them find their own answers?

Do you believe there's only one way to handle a situation?

Do you get annoyed when you have to go over an issue again and again?

Do you throw people into new experiences without being around to help them out?

Do you make promises you don't or can't fulfill?

Do you get upset when someone you believed in lets you down?

Do you occasionally lie about opportunities for advancement or promotion to avoid addressing the limited available options?

Do you gossip with other managers about your employees?

Recognize and Deal with Problems in the Mentoring Relationship

Despite your best intentions, mentoring may not work out for you. Perhaps your mentee hasn't lived up to your expectations. Or maybe the individual has outgrown you, requiring challenges and skills you no longer can provide. Whatever the case, know when it's time to call it quits.

Discuss your decision to end the relationship with your employee. Point out the need for a new mentor to help close the individual's developmental gaps. Together, come up with a list of prospective new mentors that have these competencies.

Make it clear, however, that your door is always open to the individual, as it is for all your employees.

Cross-Gender Mentoring

Rumors can arise when you mentor someone of the opposite sex. One

manager, for example, was warned by his boss that he might not get the promotion he had earned because of a rumor that he was having an affair with his female mentee. Although there was no truth to this rumor, the manager was faced with a choice of furthering his own career or that of his mentee.

He decided to continue the mentoring relationship and, furthermore, to extend it to include another staff member. In the end, not only was he promoted, one of his mentees took his position when he moved up.

You cannot stop the rumor mill. People spread gossip because they're jealous of the special attention the mentee is getting.

However, once they see there clearly is nothing salacious going on, they usually get bored and seek other targets.

If you do sense jealousy on the part of other staff members, try to be more accessible to them. Also alert your mentee not to aggravate the situation by flaunting the association with you.

Identifying Problems

If you suspect there's a problem in your mentoring relationship, you may want to get feedback from your mentee.

Determine whether you are addressing the person's needs and meeting his or her expectations.

Find out if the mentee is satisfied with the way the meetings are going. Solicit suggestions for improvement.

Ask if there are special issues or new goals that should be discussed.

Honestly ascertain whether the person still needs your help or if it's time to find someone else. ☆