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Developing and Executing a Corporate Mentorship Program

Although mentorships look and feel very different to different people, there is no question about how important a good mentorship can be to an individual and a business. There are strategies that can help a business design and implement a successful program for everyone involved.

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Mentorship is a personal experience and it is unlikely that any mentorship experience looks or feels the same to different people.

Some mentors are formal, others informal, and while one may disagree on the definition of a mentor, most agree about the importance of mentorship on one's life trajectory. Positive professional mentor relationships have significant beneficial impact on an individual's professional career. A successful mentorship program can provide substantial benefits to businesses. For example, if successful, a mentoring program can aid in the development of workplace talent, identify future organizational leaders, increase employee engagement, develop leadership skills, integrate along corporate and institutional knowledge, improve employee retention, increase job and career satisfaction, and project a positive employer brand.

Successful programs offer huge value return for the business, mentors, and mentees. Mentoring uses

personnel resources to teach critical thinking, develop interpersonal skills, increase employee engagement, and transfer company knowledge. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to develop a successful mentorship program. Therefore, this column presents strategies that will assist business leaders and mentorship program advocates to design, develop, and execute a mentorship program in such a way that its likelihood of success will be substantially increased. We discuss initial steps for developing a formal corporate mentorship program within your organization and focus on the strategic direction in the development of successful mentor program initiative that is in alignment with your organization's goals. While there are innumerable types of mentoring programs (many of which have great value), this column focuses on a formal corporate mentoring program that matches an experienced mentor with a less experienced mentee. If this type of one-on-one mentoring program does not fit the needs of your organization, there are many other important and valuable programs one could explore. Co-mentoring, reverse mentoring, and group mentoring programs certainly have their place in the right organizations. In fact, some organizations may find a traditional program can be altered using the theories surrounding these other mentoring formats to improve its usage and success.

Establishing the Mentoring Program

One may ask, do employees really want mentoring? Studies have shown, yes, they do. Deloitte conducted a study in 2016 that explained Millennials, who now account for half of the workforce, seek continuous training and feedback. Further, Deloitte suggested Millennials who intend to stay with a company for more than five years are two times as likely to have a mentor than not. In the same Deloitte survey, the Millennials said an ideal working week would include more mentoring time than they currently receive. [<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-millennial-survey-2016-exec-summary.pdf>]

A successful mentoring program must have buy-in from the organization's top leaders. The tone-at-top must support the program to improve its chances of success. If the leaders authentically believe in the value of a mentoring program, the organization will have a much higher chance at developing and executing an initiative that will be effective and beneficial for its employees. Your most supportive program leaders should be willing to encourage participation, champion the program, and perhaps even participate in mentoring activities.

Successful mentoring programs must have a clear purpose. Program developers should clearly understand their desires for and organizational needs of the program. It generally is useful to develop a mission statement for the mentoring program so that its objectives can be easily understood and explained. For example, "The primary purpose of My First Company's mentoring program is career and professional development. A successful and respected professional (mentor) works with another professional (mentee) who desires to grow, improve, and develop."

In addition to a clear purpose, the structure of the program should align with company culture. For example, if an organization thrives in a less structured setting, then the mentorship program should allow for that same type of flexibility with each mentor/mentee relationship. If the company culture is one that develops people using a strength-based focus, then the mentoring program should use the same approach when mentors are working with their mentees.

Mentoring program visionaries must understand the development and execution of a successful mentoring program is not free. While the program may not require a significant initial monetary outlay or financial investment, it will require the investment of time from leaders within the organization. Developers should create a budget that may be used for items such as communication and mentor program training materials, kick-off and ongoing events, mentor incentives and expense reimbursements, and online mentoring software, if needed. The program will require training at all levels to increase its likelihood of success, which requires a time commitment from the developers of the training and its participants.

Clearly defined mentor and mentee roles and goals will aid and empower participants in the program. Depending on the program's objectives, a mentor should provide feedback and feedforward on job performance, work relationships, technical information, network opportunities, and role expectations. Mentors should attempt to share lessons they have learned throughout their career. A strong mentor needs to have several soft/interpersonal skills. For example, a mentor should have a genuine interest, sensitivity to another's needs and development, strong listening skills, time availability and the intention to invest that time, a commitment to providing feedback and coaching, and feedback skills. A mentor should avoid dominance, control, or over-protection; be proactive;

follow up on interactions and commitments; set clear expectations and goals; ask mentees open-ended questions (instead of telling or ordering); be self-responsible and model this quality to mentees; provide career guidance; be a source of information and encouragement; and help develop creative and independent thinking.

It also is critical for the mentee to identify his/her desired outcomes of the mentoring program. The mentee also must clearly understand his/her role as a mentee. This will enhance the outcomes of the mentoring relationship. A mentee should have a genuine interest in professional and personal growth, a sense of self and personal vision, a commitment to learning, listening skills, a willingness to trust and take risks, self-management, self-responsibility, and open communication. A mentee must understand and respect the mutual goals and expectations of the relationship, utilize active listening, share equal responsibility of active engagement, be open to feedback, be sensitive to the needs of the mentor, and follow through on commitments.

Mentoring is more than just training and development. However, those interested in participating in a mentoring program will need training to understand both the roles of the mentee and mentor. Each individual should understand the purpose of the program, and his/her expectations around the role as indicated above.

Choosing Mentors and Mentees

Perhaps the most difficult part in the development of an effective mentoring program is matching mentors with mentees. Methods for participant selection and for effectively matching mentors with mentees will vary based on the program structure. Many successful mentorship programs allow the program to be voluntary. Perhaps the best opportunity for participation is to encourage all parties to participate in an introduction of the mentorship program and the roles of mentors and mentees within the program. After the initial introduction to the initiative, you may want to conduct a “Call for Mentors” and a “Call for Mentees” that can range from nominations by senior leaders to self-identification based on interest. Interested participant pairings will vary based on the objectives of the program. Things that may need to be considered in the matching process include focus areas/competencies, personality types (perhaps even personality testing), and mentors/mentees program objectives. (After pairings are done, if relationships are not working out,

both mentees and mentors should have the ability to suggest and/or make changes without any concern of repercussions or retaliation for doing so.) Once mentors and mentees are paired, kick off the program with a high energy event that will encourage excitement around it.

Maintain, Evaluate and Update

A mentoring program should not be developed, introduced, and then forgotten. Continuous improvement to the program is a requirement for its success. I would like to state that the initial development of our mentoring program was flawless, without error and successful from the beginning. However, that would not be an accurate representation. Initially, we required all parties to participate in the program regardless of interest. Leadership paired mentees with supervisors hoping that more definite goals and training plans would be developed. We quickly realized that unless a mentor and mentee are both interested and appropriately paired, the program will not be successful; therefore, we had to go back to the drawing board to revamp the program to better meet the needs of our organization and our employees. It is important to continuously communicate with participants to discuss the challenges and successes of the program. Program developers must be willing to make changes as needed to ensure the program meets its objectives.

The evaluation of a mentorship program can be difficult, but it is very important. You should monitor and measure the results of the program against the program objectives. Some questions you can ask are:

- Is the retention rate of program participants better than that of nonparticipants?
- Is the program meeting participation goals?
- What percentage of goals set because of the mentoring meetings has been achieved?
- Do the mentors have the appropriate skills for your mentee’s development needs or is additional training needed?
- Are mentees using the assistance of their mentors to improve their development and career opportunities?

To keep your program energized, allow for flexibility and continuous improvement, offer ideas for new mentoring activities, and offer additional training through Webinars and external classes. Focus on and share program success stories.

While not easy, successful mentoring programs can provide exceptional benefits to the company and its participants. It is difficult and expensive to hire

and train employees; a well-constructed mentoring program will help develop, retain, and motivate your most valuable resource—your employees! ■

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