6 Ways to Make Mentoring Matter at Your Company

How are you celebrating National Learning and Development Month this October? With a mentoring program, perhaps? Find out six ways you can create a mentoring program that makes an impact.

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How are you celebrating National Learning and Development Month this October? What? You didn't know? That's OK. Because you know something far more important – than building skills is an ongoing process that should be happening throughout the year. And sure enough, there are countless employee and leadership development programs to help you do just that. But you don't necessarily need these pricey options when you already have one that's free – your own employees. One of the best ways to grow your people is to empower them to grow each other through internal mentoring programs. It's also a great way to nurture stronger connections at work and foster a better culture. Here's what to consider when implementing a mentoring program at your company.

Mutual Benefits

Mentorships are win-win-win situations as mentors, mentees, and the organization experience a range of benefits:

- Mentees receive wisdom and support from experienced colleagues to help them navigate their development. That can include advice on boosting strengths, exploring new ways of thinking, and gaining greater visibility within the organization.
- Mentors often get a lot of personal satisfaction from sharing their experiences, as well as exposure to new points of views from their mentees.
- Organizations gain bolstered morale, engaged employees, enhanced performance, and reduced turnover, and are able to identify high potentials as a result of mentoring programs – all of which can improve a company's employee value proposition and create a stronger employer brand.

Mentoring vs. Coaching

Mentoring is different from coaching. Sort of. The distinction between the two is hazy, but generally speaking:

- Coaching is a short-term mix of ongoing and spontaneous conversations between an employee and a more experienced professional about specific work tasks and issues. Often, a worker's main coach is the person's manager.
- Mentoring is long-term and development-oriented. The aim is to advance personal and professional lives. Mentoring may tackle self-confidence, personal branding, work-life balance, and other important areas. And notably, mentors are almost never managers, who might consciously or otherwise place their interests above a mentee's.

Formal vs. Informal

There are also two general approaches to mentoring:

- Informal relationships are typically initiated by mentees, who often select mentors who they feel can help with their development. At the same time, there's little to no structure around meetings, objectives, or development plans.
- Formal relationships, on the other hand, have much more structure. They are built around a detailed process, from the pairing of people to meetings to closing out relationships.

About 37 percent of organizations have informal mentoring programs, while 29 percent include more formal ones. But before you opt for the former because it seems like the simpler of the two options – stop! Chances are, a formal program will yield better results. An informal initiative seems attractive because it demands less effort to run. However, a lack of specific and measurable aims, guidelines

and training for mentors and mentees, and structure around timing and content of conversations risk turning the program into a hot mess. Informal arrangements are also likely to exclude would-be participants who aren't able to identify a mentor or mentee on their own. In other words, effective mentorship programs rely on HR leadership for structure and support.

6 Tips for an Awesome Mentoring Program

Matchmaking:

Gather information from people interested in joining the program. Survey them on their objectives and preferences. What do they want to get out of the mentorship? What would an ideal mentor/mentee look like? Such data will enable you to make more effective matches.

Failed Matches:

Not all pairs will click. That's OK. Make sure both parties have an easy out sooner rather than later by including an evaluation early in the process.

Time Management:

Mentors and mentees should feel free to make their own schedules. The key is to have meetings on a regular basis. It also helps to create a rough agenda of planned topics and questions prior to sit-downs, so both parties are able to make sure that conversations are productive. And yes, sit-downs. In-person always works better than email or phone.

Simplicity:

It's important not to confuse "structured" with "complicated." Your program should still be simple. For instance, don't force people to discuss specific topics. Instead, provide tip sheets to guide dialogue. Keep guidelines minimal

Advice:

Mentors should avoid telling mentees what to do. Rather, they should ask questions that can help mentees steer themselves in the right direction. Likewise, mentees should continually self-reflect so that they, too, ask meaningful questions.

Power and Generational Differences:

Mentorship relationships should not be influenced by people's levels in an organization. Nor should age play a role. Instead, people should be paired based on how well their interests fit. For example, junior employees can often "reverse-mentor" more senior executives on new ways of approaching work, technology, social media, etc.

The Gender Question

Finally, you can't talk about mentoring these days without acknowledging that men may have become increasingly uneasy serving as mentors to women. Research shows that the proportion of male managers who are uncomfortable mentoring women has more than tripled in the wake of recent sexual scandals. Furthermore, research indicates that almost one-third of male managers are now uncomfortable working alone with a woman. And senior-level men are 3.5 times more likely to hesitate to have a work dinner with a junior-level woman than a man in the same position. The solution is not to pair people based on gender, which can consequently hurt women's careers. It is to remind employees to be professional and courteous, focus conversations on development, and let mentees make decisions around selecting public meeting places and other arrangements. Ultimately, a mentoring program is a fantastic way to cultivate a culture of development. As mentors and mentees bond and learn from each other, your company will experience greater knowledge sharing. Perhaps most important, mentoring sends a message that you value your people enough to let them thrive together.

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