

The Merits of Mentoring

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Mentoring is a term that has many connotations and interpretations, so it seems appropriate to start a discussion about mentoring with its definition. We consider mentoring to be a process of professional development, with a focus on the individual's and the organization's continuous improvement. At its core, is an experienced facilitator with objective approaches and proven management experience. It is this skill and experience that then adds value to whomever is being mentored.

A Mentor provides his or her expertise and experience to others to increase their effectiveness and achieve better results. Mentors guide, teach, show, lead, develop, support, inspire and facilitate the professional development of others, both from the perspective of technical knowledge and skills AND behavioral nuances.

The concept of mentoring has existed as long as positions of management have existed. Lately, mentoring has become a buzzword in the corporate world; however, with a properly designed program, mentoring can be a very cost effective way to approach performance improvement within an organization.

Mentoring can be very effective, as long as certain criteria are present. Most importantly, mentoring must be based on content. If not, it is arbitrary, subjective, and elusive and it is difficult to determine if it is effective. Often mentoring initiatives are launched within an organization, where a less experienced employee is paired with a more experienced employee. In our experience, these informal, unstructured initiatives are difficult to implement, replicate and sustain. Within a short period of time, these 'warm and fuzzy' mentoring attempts fizzle out and little is accomplished.

Having a concrete curriculum of 'hard' (effective) and 'soft' (affective) skills provides the framework to work from so that the mentor can ensure the growth and development of those being mentored. Examining technical content at a deeper level is intellectually stimulating while simultaneously working on behavioral skills is therapeutic from an organizational perspective. While the focus of the program may appear technical on the surface, there is a parallel emphasis on critical skills such as networking, transferring skills, adapting and producing results.

Mentoring is the systematic application of what 'good managers' historically do. Think back on a manager that you have worked for in the past. Did they guide you? Teach you? Model desired behaviors? Lead you? Inspire you? Support you? And facilitate your development? If you answered yes to all the preceding questions, then that manager was a great mentor to you. While such attributes may be innate for good managers, the challenge lies in developing these attributes in others. With the right program, the good news is that these behaviors can be learned and developed.

Another criterion for mentoring is the ability to give and receive feedback. If a program has specific performance goals and measurement tools, it is then possible to give content-based feedback. And content-based feedback is objective. It is business. It is based on fact. It is not a personality contest. It is not personal. It is an analysis and evaluation of actual performance.

A Mentor must be able to examine performance objectives and decide how an individual has performed. In addition, a Mentor must be able to communicate this feedback to the individual being mentored. And then together, they must synthesize how to move forward. Remember, the focus is on Continuous Improvement.

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