



Jim Perrone

## Creating a Mentoring Culture

*Learn steps for establishing a formal mentoring system in your organization.*

More and more organizations are creating formal mentoring programs—and with good reason. From a happier staff to increased organizational productivity, the benefits of a workplace culture that actively supports and organizes mentoring are abundant. While organizational mentoring programs may take on different shapes and structures, there are critical steps for a group embarking on establishing a mentoring system. Following are steps most often followed by organizations that have been able to initiate and sustain a meaningful mentoring process.

### 1. Define the business case for mentoring.

Mentoring should be seen as a critical element in helping the organization achieve its strategic goals. A formal mentoring program can help:

- improve retention
- build morale
- accelerate leadership development
- provide ongoing career development
- build teams
- facilitate organizational learning

A strong business case must be made to demonstrate why the organization should devote the attention and resources required to make a formal mentoring process work. For example, a healthcare organization foreseeing tremendous growth in a specific area may want a mentoring program to help prepare individuals for future managerial positions. Or an organization planning integration may be interested in a mentoring program to help shape talent that would fit the total entity. The point is, the reasons for establishing a mentoring program must be linked to your organization's business goals.

### 2. Establish a mentoring strategy.

A clear mentoring vision has the capacity to act as a guiding mechanism for the mentoring effort. Senior management and others responsible for the mentoring system must come together to design the strategy, define objectives, and plan the implementation. Some questions to be considered during this process include: What is the purpose for establishing the program? What are the short-term and long-term goals? Given our goals, how many mentor and protege pairs should be considered? Who should we focus on to be mentors and proteges? A steering committee should be established and a coordina-

tor selected to oversee implementation. It is important that committee members and the coordinator are truly interested in the success of the program and believe that the development of future leadership is critical. Members of the steering committee may include interested senior-level individuals, a human resource representative, department heads, and others, depending on the goal of the mentoring program. For example, if the objective of the program is to develop leadership skills in nurses, then nurses should be represented on the committee.

### 3. Select proteges and mentors.

Using the organization's strategic intentions for mentoring as a primary reference point, the steering committee must define the criteria and characteristics for selecting and matching mentors and proteges. For example, if the goal of your organization is to develop new leaders as a part of succession planning, the committee will want to choose mentors who have many years in a leadership role, who are high performers, or who have many individuals in their department who have been promoted. To choose the appropriate proteges, the committee may want to identify those individuals who have demonstrated clear evidence of future leadership. Keep in mind that for the program to be effective, proteges and mentors must join the program on a voluntary basis; appointing them will not work. The mentor and protege must be enthusiastic and willing.

### 4. Provide mentor and protege skill training.

Successful mentoring programs always provide formal training to mentors regarding the special mind-set and skill set required to establish and sustain a learning partnership with a protege. This

training should emphasize to mentors the difference between a mentoring role and a management role. It should also highlight the different skills and competencies mentors should develop, such as the ability to empower other people, to support them, and to challenge them. They must also have the ability to listen as a mentor and not as a problem solver. Proteges must receive training on how to be the driving force in a mentoring relationship. The training should also help them assess their strengths and weaknesses, identify developmental objectives, and decide how they will use their mentor. Training sessions are the perfect time to spell out the roles and responsibilities for participants. For example, mentors should not get between proteges and their managers or get overly involved in the details of the protege's work. Proteges need to understand that having a mentor doesn't guarantee that they will get promoted or have unlimited access to their mentor.

### **5. Link up proteges and mentors.**

How proteges and mentors are matched up is based on the goals of the mentoring program. Formally bringing mentors and proteges together to define their expectations of each other and the process is an extremely important step. During this meeting, a formal mentoring agreement is created that serves as a reference point throughout the mentoring process. The mentoring agreement should include the goals and objectives of both the protege and the mentor, how and when they will meet, and a confidentiality agreement.

### **6. Evaluate the program.**

Those mentoring programs that do the best job of institutionalizing their mentoring programs evaluate the impact of the mentoring from two primary refer-

ence points. The first is the degree to which the process has assisted the protege in achieving the developmental objectives that were defined at the beginning of the program. The second reference point is the degree to which the program was successful in achieving its strategic business case goals, such as retention or the development of high potentials. Furthermore, successful programs bring mentors and proteges together for checkup meetings and follow-up training several times during the typical mentoring year. The best programs usually have a way of ending the mentoring relationship formally. During this time, the protege and mentor can decide if they want to continue the relationship formally or informally, or if they want to move on.

Ultimately, formal mentoring works best in an organization where people development and organizational learning are supported and nurtured by leadership at all levels. A mentoring culture is more important than just going through the administrative motions of carrying out a formal system. ▲

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