

Using Mentoring as a Part of Professional Development¹

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A significant number of organizations, such as AT&T and Apple, are adopting mentoring programs as a vital part of their professional development plans. Cooper and Miller (1998) stated the benefits of mentoring include:

- faster, more effective integration of new employees;
- retention of quality professionals;
- increased transfer of skills from one generation to another;
- gains in productivity and performance;
- increased learning from professional development activities;
- enhanced communication, commitment, and motivation;
- a stabilizing factor in times of change.

This EDIS publication will define mentoring, give a brief history, and review the stages of the mentoring process. It will also highlight the benefits mentors, protégés, and organizations can expect from the utilization of a mentoring process.

History of Mentoring

The idea of mentoring is rooted deeply in Greek mythology (Homer, 1980). The term “mentor” originally comes from Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*. As a good friend, Mentor was asked by Odysseus to watch over his palace and his son when he left to fight in the Trojan War. In this position of

responsibility, Mentor coached and counseled Telemachus, Odysseus’ son, guiding him in his development from infancy to early adulthood.

Defining Mentoring

A mentor is defined as an influential, established, knowledgeable member of an organization who supports and commits to the upward mobility of a protégé’s professional career (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Mentoring is an opportunity for a mentor to use his/her knowledge and expertise to facilitate the personal and professional development of a new employee. For the protégé, mentoring is an opportunity to learn from someone with more experience and knowledge. The mentoring relationship typically lasts several years and often ends in a friendship (Cooper & Miller, 1998).

Because of its many benefits, mentoring has increased in popularity and is being implemented in numerous organizations (Cooper & Miller, 1998). As a result, mentoring is now being defined in a broader way. The long-term, formal mentor-protégé relationships that used to span several years are no longer the norm. Colleagues, peers, and subordinates can be mentors and these relationships may last only days, weeks, or months. With short-term programs, individuals may have many mentors that serve to teach and counsel on a variety of topics. Although industry trends towards a shorter-term mentor program, research shows mentor

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relationships are most effective when they last at least a year (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). For the purpose of this publication, mentoring is a long-term relationship that develops the protégé as an individual who understands all aspects of an organization.

Benefits

Benefits to the mentor, the protégé, and the organization have all been cited as outcomes of formal mentoring programs and strong mentoring relationships (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Benefits to each group are listed below (Cooper & Miller, 1998).

Mentor

- Exposure to new ideas, educational methods, technologies, and perspectives through conversations with the protégé
- A sense of accomplishment in helping someone else professionally
- Ability to pass a legacy of information and history to the next generation of employees
- Increased professional contacts through protégé's contacts
- Utilizing coaching, communication, and counseling skills
- Enhanced reputation through a demonstration of commitment to the organization
- Opportunity for personal reflection
- Knowledge that the profession will be enhanced as a result

Protégé

- Gaining new ideas, technical expertise, interpersonal and managerial skills
- Increased achievement as a result of being encouraged to reach for higher goals and take educated risks
- Self confidence in decision making within the organization
- Insight on the culture of the organization that could never be attained without personal time and experience invested
- Gaining a relationship with a person who can serve as a role model, a sounding board to give feedback on personal and professional goals and ideas, and a source of stability when facing new challenges
- Professional contacts
- Increased competencies and stronger interpersonal skills

- Assistance in identifying your weaknesses and how to address them

Organization

- Improved employee interaction contributing to higher job performance
- Develops partnerships and allies
- Enhances a positive environment and provides a clear understanding of expectations for new employees
- Increase in retention by increasing comfort levels of employees
- Higher level of employee commitment and loyalty

Mentor Responsibilities

A good mentor is someone who cares about people, who can be easily trusted, and who can and is willing to help the protégé develop to his/her fullest potential (Place & Bailey, 2006). The relationship should be focused on helping the protégé understand, plan, and implement the goals the protégé wants to achieve. The mentor assists in making transitions in knowledge, work, and ways of thinking.

Guidance and support to a developing individual is provided while the mentor acts as coach, role model, or just someone who will listen. Expanding the protégés' horizons in an effort to increase his or her chances of success on every level is the goal. This can come in the form of offering guidance, advice, and assistance as new challenges arise. By sharing one's own experiences and life challenges, a mentor assists in developing a deeper understanding of how to deal with situations as they arise (Cooper & Miller, 1998). For example, if a new Extension agent is dealing with an especially difficult volunteer issue, a more experienced agent can assist by giving details on how a similar issue was dealt with in the past. Not only is the offered information valuable, but knowing someone else has gone through similar hard times is comforting to a new employee as well.

Mentoring is also a way to help people fully understand where they are currently in their career, where they want to be, and how to get there in the best possible way. Exploring the advantages of certain choices over others with an experienced individual assists in faster learning curves for the protégé (Wilburn & Cooper, n.d.). One of the main areas a mentor can assist with is goal setting. Introducing more enjoyable ways to achieve short- and long-term goals will contribute to a protégé's professional and personal success (Wilburn & Cooper, n.d.).

Characteristics of Good Mentors

Good mentors share common characteristics (Place & Bailey, 2006; Wilburn & Cooper, n.d.). A good mentor

- must have a desire to mentor;
- has subject matter and organizational knowledge;
- values the organization, its mission, and its work;
- cares about others and treats people with respect;
- can be tolerant, non-judgmental, and accepting of personal differences;
- is confident and secure with oneself;
- is able to create a comfortable environment making way for discussions;
- enjoys watching the development of the protégé;
- can be sensitive to the protégé's needs;
- trusts others and can be trusted;
- is successful in their own programming.

No mentor always possesses all of these attributes. However, these traits can be learned and improved through professional development.

Four Stages of Mentoring

L. J. Zachary's *The Mentor Guide* (2000) describes four phases the mentoring process most commonly follows—preparing, negotiating, enabling, and coming to closure. All four phases are introduced below.

Stage One: Preparing

Zachary (2000) emphasizes that preparing is the most critical stage in the mentoring process. During this time the groundwork for the relationship is agreed upon and the mentor becomes prepared for his/her new role. Typical tools to aid in this stage are a mentor handbook provided by the employer, review of mentoring materials/books, and the mentor forming a checklist of issues and subject matter that should be addressed at some point during the relationship (Smith & Beckley, 1985).

Stage Two: Negotiating

The second stage is negotiating. This is when the mentor and protégé discuss *how* learning will occur through their mentoring relationship (Zachary, 2000). This stage includes developing a framework of specific measurable goals and benchmarks that will signify success. Mentees are asked to complete an analysis of their professional development needs (called a biographical sketch) which may be helpful

in the development of the goal framework. The development of a formal agreement will drive the mentoring relationship forward by articulating the detailed goals towards which both parties are striving. Well-defined goals and expectations will lend themselves to a positive closure to the relationship (as discussed in Stage Four).

Stage Three: Enabling

The mentor offers support, vision, and encouragement when working with the protégé on specific goals or issues as they arise. Zachary (2000) emphasizes the importance of the mentor during the enabling stage of the relationship. Mentors must manage the relationship through active support, contacting the protégé on a regular basis, and being proactive at drawing out issues the protégé may be facing. Momentum will be maintained by monitoring and evaluating progress and encouraging continued growth. The mentor should also be encouraging reflection and assessment on the part of the protégé during this stage (Zachary, 2000).

Stage Four: Coming to Closure

The last stage of the mentoring process, closure, is by far the most difficult stage of the process (Zachary, 2000). Zachary suggests that while closure is an inevitable part of a mentoring relationship, most people feel anxiety and resentment when things end abruptly. Long-term dependence on one influential person is not helpful, although some mentoring partnerships have led to lifelong friendships (Zachary, 2000). Mentoring is a goal-oriented process, and therefore needs to have an end point once the protégé has attained the professional competencies outlined in the goal framework that was developed in Stage Two. Discussing closure to the relationship during the second stage is extremely important in order to lower levels of anxiety and surprise (Zachary, 2000).

Establishing Mentoring Boundaries

According to Mincemoyer and Thomson (1998), boundaries, too, need to be established at the beginning of the mentoring process. Components to consider when setting expectations include the mentor's organizational knowledge, the protégé's previous experience, attitudes both parties bring to meetings, and the level both individuals are currently in their profession. Comfort level on subject matter (whether personal or professional) being discussed during mentor conversations also needs to be examined and agreed upon. Place and Bailey (2006) suggested the role of the mentor should be clearly defined by all parties

involved at the start of the relationship. Therefore, the interests of everyone concerned, including the employer (particularly if confidentiality is an issue), should be addressed.

Making Mentoring Work

According to Grayer and Smith (1995), the relationship between mentor and protégé should be personal and confidential. A mentor needs to challenge and support without telling the protégé what to do. A good mentor will build a protégé's confidence and independence. Through goal setting, the protégé can take full and effective responsibility for his/her future development.

The structure and frequency of meetings depends on the needs of those involved and can therefore vary. It is good practice, however, to arrange the next date before the close of a meeting. It is also helpful if the mentor can be reached earlier than planned if something comes up.

Both the mentor and the protégé should feel they are gaining personal satisfaction and are experiencing personal growth during the progress of a mentoring relationship. If a mentor can approach the undertaking with an open mind, learning from the protégé often occurs. In addition, development opportunities typically arise that would not have otherwise been considered. For example, a long term employee may not think of taking a course on coaching or communication styles; however, both courses offer valuable supplemental information for a mentor.

Summary

This fact sheet provided an overview of mentoring and the stages in the mentoring process. A well-planned mentoring relationship can lead to benefits for the mentors, protégés, and the overall organization. Professionals asked to serve as mentors, and currently serving as mentors, are encouraged to periodically review this fact sheet as they progress through their mentoring relationships. Successful mentoring relationships will positively contribute to an organizational culture supportive of the growth of its young professionals.

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