

Designing a Mentoring Program

Establish the roles of an advisory relationship

By Karen Appold

Mentoring traces its roots back to the days of old, when blacksmiths, carpenters and the like took young protégés under their wings as apprentices. Like an apprenticeship, a mentorship is a more experienced individual passing down practical knowledge and skills concerning tasks and how to succeed in a specific environment. Learning occurs over time and includes modeling as well as advice giving and guidance, said Marcia Reynolds, MA, M Ed, president of Covisioning, Phoenix, an organization focused on leadership development.

A mentoring program can benefit any work environment. According to Scott Brown, author, JobSearchHandbook.com, New York, the biggest potential benefit to employers is a lower turnover rate. Additionally, most organizations are set up to simply provide professional support to employees. However, new employees also need extra emotional support.

While mentoring strives to achieve career growth, retention, consistency, confidence and optimization of human resources, Reynolds cautioned that it doesn't guarantee promotions, career advancement and credibility.

Additionally, mentoring shouldn't be viewed as a way to hire inexperienced employees. "A common mistake managers make with mentoring programs is believing that they can save money by hiring employees who are less qualified than what they need," Brown said. "The truth is a good mentoring program, like a good internship program, is not free."

Getting Started

When creating a program, recruit leaders in your workplace who are eager to mentor. Train the mentors before matching them with employees. "They need to understand what their commitment involves and be equipped with good coaching skills before the program gets underway," Reynolds said.

They should earn a mentoring slot by performance, both on the job and in their relationships with peers. After organizing a group of trained, committed mentors, employees should apply to be mentored, Reynolds said.

When the matches are made, set standards regarding how many times each pair should meet. Also, Reynolds recommended holding monthly seminars with all mentors and mentees so they can learn something new together.

Elements of a Mentorship

To be successful, a mentoring program should have a plan for mentoring, scheduled feedback to program facilitators, reviews of the mentoring pairings by mentor and mentee regularly, and a review following the first mentoring program completion, said Melissa Giovagnoli, president, Networlnding, Chicago, a training, coaching and marketing organization.

At the heart of it, Brown said a mentoring program is a formal way to create a relationship between a more experienced clinician and a new employee. The main ingredient from an organizational perspective is follow-up. Make sure the mentee is getting value from the relationship.

Fine Tuning

A mentor should use good coaching skills to discover the employee's values, expectations and dreams. "Then, they can discuss paths and possibilities," Reynolds said.

One important thing to note is that someone's manager shouldn't serve as her mentor, Giovagnoli said. The manager can meet with an employee's mentor and discuss work-related goals that result from the mentor-mentee meeting. However, the mentor should keep confidentiality as the mentee should be able to share personal information regarding concerns inside and outside the workplace.

The mentor may suggest that the mentee keep a journal to track progress, Brown said, which could be a topic of discussion at the mentor-mentee meetings.

The Mentor's Responsibilities

Certain qualities will ensure a healthy and successful mentor-mentee relationship. A mentor should be an unbiased role model, sounding board and advisor with whom the protégé may discuss work-related and other concerns regarding job performance and advancement, Reynolds said. He should provide information about the organization that will assist in assimilating culture and values. Additionally, he should:

- share experiences and knowledge;
- show sincere interest;
- honor commitments to meet;
- provide complete and honest feedback;
- be honest when he doesn't have the answers—be a resource provider instead; and
- be open to honest feedback from the protégé.

The Mentee's Responsibilities

Like the mentor, the mentee should fulfill her responsibilities in the relationship. She should communicate with the mentor and make an effort to professionally develop.

Additionally, Giovagnoli and Reynolds said she should:

- prepare for each session—send two or three questions in advance to her mentor to discuss during the session;
- ask for help and support;
- provide feedback to her mentor and manager so each knows the progress of the mentoring and how to improve the experience if necessary;
- make time for assignments;
- be open to sharing information, hearing and considering all advice, taking risks and trying new behaviors and tasks; and
- have realistic expectations and flexibility to change them as the organization and environment changes.

Mentoring is a chance to move outside traditional organizational boundaries and to talk more candidly and, ultimately—Giovagnoli said—to achieve a more rewarding work

environment with a clearer path carved for career success. Consider establishing a mentorship program in your facility which can benefit all employees.

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Sidebar: Mentor and Mentee Roles

Mentors and mentees should work toward common goals. Both need to be held accountable to make the partnership work. According to Marcia Reynolds, MA, M Ed, president, Covisioning, Phoenix, both parties should:

- clarify roles and expectations;
- devote time and energy with a positive attitude;
- listen patiently; don't respond too soon—be sensitive to differences in communication and personality styles;
- uphold confidences;
- be sensitive to issues and policies of sexual harassment or discrimination;
- recognize that this is a learning process for both parties;
- admit mistakes and share failures; and
- establish an end date for the mentorship, but extend it if both parties agree.

Additionally, Reynolds said both participants in the mentoring program should have a desire to:

- make a contribution;
- find a way to enjoy work;
- freely express their curiosity;
- learn more about their jobs and themselves;
- take risks in the spirit of learning;
- practice new learning on the job;
- review goals regularly and change as appropriate;
- be respected and valued for thinking, learning and effort as well as doing;
- work with colleagues they trust and respect;
- participate in developing the vision and strategy for their job; and
- see the potential to advance in their career and life.

—Karen Appold

Additional Reading

Reynolds M. *Outsmart Your Brain! How to Make Success Feel Easy*. Phoenix, AZ: Covisioning. January 2004.