



Organisational mentoring

First published in the Professional Women International (PWI) newsletter Spring 2001.

Most people are familiar with the concept of a mentor as the older wiser businessman passing down knowledge and contacts to the up-and-coming high-flier.

There is still a role for this type of relationship - although no longer in such a male-dominated environment perhaps!

However, today's organisational structure is rather different to the old managerial hierarchy - and so too is mentoring. These days mentoring, and coaching, are more accurately, if loosely, defined as the facilitation of an individual's learning process, enabling the individual to take ownership for their own development.

Ask any mentee how they benefit from having a mentor and they are likely to cite having a sounding-board as a major factor - someone who listens objectively, facilitates them in working out the best course of action and then helps to reflect on the outcome.

In other words, mentors offer clear thinking space, challenge assumptions and help the individual to 'raise the bar' in terms of realising their potential.

Mentoring is powerful in taking account of both the short and long term. Firstly, it explores and acts on what's happening 'right now', whether problems or opportunities. Secondly, it looks ahead to the future. Mentoring encourages the generation of ideas but is actually very action / goal oriented, assisting the mentee in defining career and life goals and developing appropriate plans to achieve them.

Emphasis is usually placed, as here, on the benefits to the mentee but the vast majority of mentors - those who truly enter into the spirit of mentoring - will agree that the relationship and learning experience are very much two-way.

The organisational approach

Organisations are increasingly adopting mentoring as an effective way of developing staff in the 'real world'. Training has its place in the acquisition of new skills but is less suited to fine tuning skills and to exploring specific individual situations or behaviours in anything close to 'real time'.

The organisational benefits manifest themselves in many and varied ways - greater productivity and profitability perhaps but also improved communication, morale, two-way loyalty and reduced staff turnover. These benefits do not come without responsibilities, however. There are many factors influencing the success of a mentoring programme. Companies have a duty to provide mentors and mentees with a clear framework for the relationship and to ensure that participants have the appropriate skills and attitude to perform the role.

For those able to take advantage of a company sponsored mentoring programme, the relationship may take many forms. Some organisations including leading UK banks, have developed mentoring schemes for specific employees, for instance to help women or those belonging to ethnic groups to break into senior management.



The nature of the mentoring 'conversation' may also differ. In some schemes, particularly where there is a strong skills-development focus, the relationship may be quite directive and bear a strong resemblance to one-to-one training. In most schemes focused on senior staff and / or career development, however, the remit is non-directive whereby the mentor does not attempt to 'tell' the mentee what to do!

Similarly, the hierarchical relationship between the mentor and mentee's job roles may also vary. The traditional model of the senior mentor working with a more junior mentee still stands but it is also valid for the mentor and mentee to be of equivalent status, perhaps working in different fields, or even for the mentor to be junior to the mentee. There is much talk of this latter approach being appropriate as a means of assisting female middle managers to advance to board level positions through mentoring board members to remove perceived barriers to entry and supporting them when they get there.

Informal peer mentoring

For those who do not have access to a company programme, peer mentoring through a professional organisation may be a viable alternative.

The Coaching & Mentoring Network recently facilitated a mentoring workshop for PWI in which members explored the nature and success factors relating to a peer mentoring relationship.

Organisations such as PWI tend to enjoy very proactive and supportive networking amongst members. Peer mentoring provides the next step: a framework within which members can develop an ongoing and objective learning alliance in which each individual is facilitated to achieve more.

How to enjoy a peer mentoring relationship

1. Clearly agree the parameters of the relationship - which aspects of life and career may be discussed and which may not.
2. Agree the logistics and format for mentoring conversations - how frequently will you meet or speak, how many mentoring sessions will you have and over what time period? It is highly recommended to agree a finite length for the relationship - at least to start with as this offers an easy exit for either party.
3. The mentee needs to be committed to making change in their life - even if only one small step at a time.
4. The mentor is not an advisor - they do not have the answers. The agenda is the mentee's - the mentor is there to facilitate, not influence, the mentee's decisions.
5. Agree measurable actions and monitor progress.

In exploring the diversity of mentoring available, it is clear that mentoring has a role to play for many of us in developing our careers. All of the models mentioned have validity as long as both mentor and mentee are clear about the nature and parameters of the relationship and share a common expectation.

When these criteria are met, both mentors and mentees can embark together on a journey through which both can truly advance towards achieving their potential - whatever that potential might be.