

“MENTORING PROGRAMS: A GOOD INVESTMENT”



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Last week's column reflected the concerns of a new employee who had been matched (or rather mismatched) with a mentor as a part of the company's orientation and assimilation program. The "mentor" not only did not support him, he seemed to intentionally create situations where he could embarrass the young man. This included putting his mistakes or lack of knowledge in "public view" at staff meetings. Without support, the employee was considering leaving to find another employer.

In this case, the employer was at fault for not knowing or not caring how to effectively match up and monitor the progress of mentoring teams. Unfortunately, some companies will pair up a team arbitrarily. They will team someone who has been with the department or company for a long time with a new employee, giving neither guidelines nor support, and call this their mentoring program.

Companies who match people up without guidance and support can give mentoring programs a bad name. When bad matches are left on their own, they can create conflict and bad feelings, resulting in the young mentee choosing to leave the organization to get relief from an abusive working relationship. This is an example of a good idea with good intentions backfiring for everyone.

If well designed on the front end with the inclusion of employees, an in-house mentoring program does not need to be high maintenance to be effective. Like any good program, there needs to be an initial investment of time and resources in order to ensure the success of its positive intent.

There are three significant ingredients for a successful mentoring program:

- 1) The first important aspect is program design and monitoring. Why are you having this program or process to begin with? What are the desired outcomes? What are the roles and expectations of the participants? How will the relationships be supported and monitored? How will incompatibility or conflicts between the pairs be addressed? How will you know if this program is successful or not?
- 2) The second important aspect is the people who participate: identification of the right mentors and the compatible pairing of the mentors and mentees. Mentors should have exceptional listening and interpersonal skills in addition to their technical knowledge. More importantly, they should WANT to have this role because for them will be a source of gratification rather than an obligation.

The pairing of the teams can be done informally, allowing them to naturally gravitate to one another, or they can be assigned through a more structured process. Some organizations will use an assessment or personality profile to help introduce potential pairs to each other, or to help them to know each other's strengths, styles and motivators from the beginning. Bottom line is there must be mutual respect and support in their relationship. Otherwise, the experience will be non-valuable at best or costly to the company at worst.

- 3) The third ingredient of a successful mentoring initiative is effective promotion. Highlight the program and its participants. Put successful teams in the limelight. Promote the program and its benefits both internally and externally. Internally, seeing success and satisfaction may create a culture where people look forward to serving as mentors.

Externally, promoting your mentoring programs will assist in your recruitment efforts as well. The incoming generation of workers wants to learn and develop new skills quickly, and advance their earning potential as well. Many will look for companies who have mentoring programs as a prerequisite to help them fulfill their professional objectives.