

Mentoring

Mentoring programs are increasingly popular with the majority of organisations using mentoring in some form. Mentoring is by no means a new concept in enhancing employee development and training. Testimonies are available from both mentors and protégés, exuding the benefits that they receive from mentoring relationships. They include improvements in thinking and problem solving by mentors; and in protégés, improved capabilities, skill and career development. Organisations also benefit as the enhanced skills and knowledge are reflected in better work performance and higher productivity.

The positive view of mentoring relationships hides the true picture in organisations however. For many, the programs end in failure, feelings of broken promises and lost opportunities. The reason is largely insufficient attention being paid to the planning and implementation of the programs. As a result, many of the problems are left unattended, and become major stumbling blocks.

So what is mentoring?

The typical aims of mentoring programs are to enhance an employee's (protégé's) development and learning by pairing him/her with a more experienced, accomplished and knowledgeable person (mentor). The mentor role is wide-ranging and its meaning differs between organisations. Frequent descriptions include teacher, guide, coach, friend, encourager, advisor, supporter and counsellor. The original use of the term 'mentor' explains its intended aims. It hails from Greek mythology, in the story of Ulysses, the warrior king of Ithica. He was frequently away in battle for long periods, during which he left his son Telemachus in the care of his wise and trusted friend, Mentor. His role was to protect, advice, support and care for the boy until Ulysses returned. It is within this context that employee mentoring is set today.

Its use is a reflection of the widely accepted view in business and academia, that formal classroom-style training is ineffective in transferring knowledge and skills. Indeed, trainees forget a third of what they are taught even before leaving the classroom. Within a month, more than three quarters of the learning is forgotten. At best, trainees can be expected to remember very little of their learning in the long term. Mentoring is thus seen as an effective and cost effective method of transferring knowledge and facilitating the development of skills in junior or inexperienced employees. The aims of the program and the dynamics of each particular relationship determine the exact role adopted by a mentor.

What types of mentoring are used?

There is a wide variety of mentoring programs in use today. The choice of models is influenced by the organisation's aims for the program, the needs of the individuals involved, and the availability of resources. They include:

- formal programs - planned and implemented by the organisation, often with the aim

of protégés learning specific knowledge, abilities and skills required for effective work performance. The mentor and protégé are matched, the goals are specified, and they are trained and supported throughout the relationship.

- individual model - a mentor is allocated to one protégé and the relationship can be very strong. This is the most common method of mentoring in the UK.
- needs-based model - there is a pool of mentors available for individuals to call on when information or assistance is required. This is virtually an informal program.
- circles model - one mentor is assigned to several protégés. It is typically used when there are few mentors with many protégés.
- learning-based model - a mentor is provided to facilitate protégés testing knowledge and skills learnt within a training context in the work setting.
- informal programs - mentors and protégés self-select themselves into pairs, the goals are unspecified, and the emphasis is largely on social development in an informal way.

Is mentoring effective?

Mentoring programs can and do produce gains for mentors, protégés and organisations.

- **Mentors**
 - gain self-fulfillment in helping others and seeing them grow
 - update skills and knowledge from helping others conceptualise and handle problems, explaining things and advising others
 - increase in personal creativity through providing and considering a variety of options with protégés to solve problems and handle situations
 - improved listening and communication skills as well as increasing patience, collaborating with others and being objective
 - higher value to the organisation - having knowledge and experience, and being able to train and inspire others are valuable assets to most organisations

Proteges

- knowledge and skill improvement as a result of learning from more experienced and knowledgeable people
- networking and contacts across levels in the organisation or with outside organisations
- career development due to improved knowledge and skills
- psychological enhancement including friendship, counselling, support and role-modelling - these are linked to higher confidence and perceived effectiveness in the job role

Organisations

- more knowledgeable and able employees at a faster learning rate and relatively

minimal costs and effort

- genuine protégé learning and development in areas that are often difficult to teach in a classroom-type setting, leading to better employee performance and productivity
- better communication and networks of relationships across the levels in the organisation
- improved problem-solving and knowledge in both protégés and mentors, leading to better work performance and productivity
- higher satisfaction, commitment and retention of employees - they feel that they and their development are cared for by the organisation

Realising the benefits of mentoring is a complex matter however, although it is possible. In many cases however, they are not realised, and the relationship ends in disappointment for one or all the parties involved. Among the important determinants are the behaviours and perceptions of the mentor and protégé. Mentors who are genuinely concerned about the development of the protégé and display the appropriate behaviours, combined with protégés who are willing and open to learn, make the benefits attainable. Three common problems hinder the success of mentoring relationships in business today:

Mis-expectations

Differences in expectations between mentors and protégés will be illustrated by the following scenarios. Firstly, mentors often see their role as one of teacher, guide and advisor - they are there to direct the protégé towards the correct information, thoughts and behaviours. In their attempt to help, they seek to tell protégés what they believe are right and wrong. This is risky however, and will not always be effective in enhancing the protégé's self-development. Some protégés' reactions can include feelings that they are being told what to do. They may also feel that they are being denied the chance to learn and handle issues by themselves. Here is a conflict between the expectations of the mentor and the protégé.

A second common occurrence are protégés who expect to be taught, directed and advised about appropriate thoughts and behaviours by mentors. They may see the relationship as that of student-teacher. The mentor however, sticks to their perception of the mentoring role: to be non-directive, a confidante, friend and emotional support. Indeed, the protégé would be entitled to ask, 'How can I learn anything from someone who does not want to teach me anything?' Here again is a conflict between the expectations of both parties.

So how should expectations be managed?

If left unattended and unresolved, these conflicting expectations can result in a rapid breakdown in the mentoring relationship. The expectations mentioned above are neither wrong nor incompatible with mentoring programs - they simply illustrate the different expectations and needs that people bring into the relationships. For the relationship to be effective, the expectations of both parties need to be established and planned into the

relationships. Mentors and protégés simply need to be explicitly clear about their expectations from each other in a mentoring agreement. This needs to be agreed and devised at the start of the relationship. When protégés state their expectations from the relationship and the mentor, then the mentor can state the extent to which he/she can meet them. Similarly, protégés will know exactly what the mentor is willing and able to do. This will reduce the risk of conflict and disappointment later on.

Absence of openness and trust

At the onset of most relationships, mentors and protégés have good intentions towards enhancing the career development of the protégé. Before long however, protégés often begin to disguise their genuine feelings, fears and concerns from their mentors. At the same time, mentors may become aware of the disintegrating communication and relationship. They may also lose interest in the relationship. The result is that the real issues and opportunities for development are not properly considered. Thus, learning and personal development does not occur. These situations can occur when mentors and protégés are matched involuntarily, when there is a clash of personalities between mentors and protégés, or when they are paired involuntarily. To illustrate, consider how you would feel if you went to work on a Monday morning, and were informed that Mr. X has been appointed as your personal mentor. How likely are you to divulge and trust him with your deepest thoughts and concerns immediately? The answer is probably 'not very likely'. Such genuine friendship, trust and openness is most likely to occur when the people voluntarily enter into the relationship, and this is no different in mentoring relationships. Voluntary relationships facilitate choice to be involved in and contribute to the relationship. Furthermore, the parties are more likely to be committed to making it a success.

Superior-mentors

It is common practice for mentors to be direct superiors of protégés. They may be managers or supervisors. Such relationships frequently end in failure as protégés have difficulty being open and trusting these mentors. The difficulties in such relationships can be explained by the differences in the roles of mentors and managers/supervisors.

The roles and responsibilities of managers contrast vastly with mentoring roles. The mentor's role of protégé guide, support, non-judgemental friend and confidante is virtually incompatible with the manager's focus on developing the employee's abilities and knowledge within the work role. The manager cannot take the non-judgmental and friend stance as their main concerns are for the employee learning the skills to get the job done in an efficient and effective way. Added to this, managers will often seek to instruct their employees about appropriate thoughts and behaviours. After all, they are managers because they know the right and the wrong ways to do things. The result is the neglect of the protégé's need for self-awareness and self-development that occurs through examining the problem from his/her perspective and the consideration of appropriate options.

These relationships are also less open and trusting. Protégés become aware of the goal focus of the superior, and the fact that they have to, and be seen to be meeting them. Failure to do so will often threaten the individual's job with the organisation. When faced with this situation, many of us would find it difficult to be open about our doubts and concerns to a manager, especially after they have told us how to approach an issue, and can punish us for not taking their advice on-board. So protégés are motivated to keep information, concerns and problems from the superior-mentor so as to avoid criticism or punishment. The outcome is deterioration in communication and lost opportunities for the protégé's personal development.

So how should mentors be selected?

The difficulty is that there is no perfect formula for selecting mentors. It is largely down to commonsense and giving the people in the relationship choice. A golden rule is to ensure that mentors are not direct superiors of protégés. This will help to avoid the conflicting roles of mentors and managers. It is however, important to ensure that the mentors' skills and knowledge are compatible with the developmental needs of the protégés. Only if this is the case, can we begin to pair mentors and protégés. Here are important considerations that should be taken into account when matching mentors and protégés:

- Ask yourself the following questions - 'Will these people get on?'. 'Are they two people who will be able to talk to each other?'. Most importantly, 'Can the protégé be open and honest with this person?'.
Ensure that mentors have the skills and knowledge relevant to the individual protégés.
- Give protégés the opportunity to choose the person they would like to be their mentor. Mentors should also be given the opportunity to choose if they can/would like to be a mentor to that individual.

Final thoughts

Mentoring programs promise benefits for protégés, mentors and their organisations. They are complex however, and present several potential trouble-spots. These include managing the expectations of mentors and protégés to ensure they are compatible, and encouraging and enhancing trust and openness in mentoring relationships. Failure to pay attention to such areas will often result in disappointment for all the parties involved. In short, mentoring programs need to be planned, designed and supported appropriately if the potential benefits are to be realised. It is the endeavor of the CAREERSINDIA research team to bring to you the contemporary developments in the field of Human Resources. These articles are published papers obtained by scanning the web extensively. We hope this will help you enhance your role as an HR Professional. This month's article is originally from the-shelf international limited.