Creating a Mentoring Program

Mentoring Partnerships Across the Generations

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If you enter “mentoring” in the search engine of a major online bookseller, you will receive 10,261 results. By adding the word “business” and narrowing the search, you will still have 263 results. Mentoring in a great variety of arenas appears to be a very hot topic, but why? Ensher and Murphy (2005) pointed out that it seems like a fad, here today and gone tomorrow, along with all of the help books and hype. But we would argue that it’s here to stay, and adds true value. Mentoring can be a great tool to prepare the next generation of leaders, share intellectual capital, pass on organizational history, and engage employees or members in an organization.

The Organization’s Overall Perspective

When your organization considers the initiation of a mentoring program, the first set of questions that needs to be asked is: What are our expectations and goals for this program? Will a mentoring program’s purpose be aligned with the organization’s objectives? How will this program tie into the organization’s strategy for its employees or members’ development and its succession planning?
Senior Leadership’s Perspective

The next set of questions is focused on the organization’s senior leadership and support for the program. Does the senior leadership understand the benefits of a mentoring program? What do they see as the value-added asset of having this additional learning opportunity available? How can they be made aware of the importance of their support? With their endorsement of a mentoring program’s proposal, other people such as managers, directors, and staff will follow. However, if the attitude is that this is nice to have but not necessary, then others may not be as willing to give their time and effort to be involved in this activity.

Employees’ or Members’ Perspective

The last set of questions is regarding the organization’s employees or members and their concerns. Would they want a mentoring program to be offered? How do they see this activity as a benefit to their development and growth? Are they able and willing to commit a certain minimum amount of time to their participation? Today, mentoring is a commonplace involvement; however, it means something different to different people. In addition, it cannot be assumed that everyone knows or understands the merits of a mentoring relationship. Employees or members need to be fully aware that an agreement is formalized and commit to at least a six-month period to have a worthwhile experience.

A Mentoring Program’s Essential Elements

The Matching Process

A screening process needs to be developed for application to the program. The extent of any qualifying criteria for candidates should be at the discretion of the organization. The senior leaders of the organization should know the composition
of their employees or members and who can benefit from participating in a mentoring relationship. Criteria should be established prior to the start of the program.

There are a number of options for accomplishing the matching procedure. They include: 1) a formal method of pairing candidates whereby a third party, usually the human resources department, reviews the submitted application forms and determines appropriate matches from the information received; and 2) informal networks where one hopes to connect with a suitable person to establish a mentoring relationship.

The Mentoring Partnership Model offers a nontraditional matching option—a self-selection process—where participants identify what they want to learn and what they can teach, and with the exchange of the information independently match themselves. Finding the appropriate match is critical to the success of a mentoring experience. Beyond the mutual learning that takes place, the existing synergy or chemistry between the partners contributes to the depth of the experience.

In a traditional mentoring relationship, one individual gains knowledge and guidance while the other person gains the opportunity to give back to a professional community or build a legacy within the organization. However, the Mentoring Partnership Model allows for mutual learning and active involvement for both partners. Therefore, an organization will have its history and intellectual capital passed on to the next generation, keep employees or members (both senior and junior) retained and engaged, and potentially identify candidates for their succession schedule.

Feedback and Evaluation

Ongoing feedback and evaluation are equally important to both the participating individuals and the organization. Feedback is a crucial communication tool between partners, between the program coordinator and partners, and to follow up
with organization leadership. An open, honest, and accepting dialogue in a mentoring relationship is vital to the individual’s growth and to the quality of the learning accomplished. Understanding how to deliver and receive feedback are skills that an individual can apply to other situations.

An evaluation process helps to determine if goals have been achieved. To keep the process on track and the goals focused, structured interim evaluations of the program’s activities and management are recommended. A final evaluation indicates the rate of success, the specific areas where it has been accomplished, and to how the goals were ultimately met.

For the program coordinator and the organization, feedback and evaluation are equally important. The coordinator needs to know about his performance level—what was carried out well and where improvements are needed. Everyone needs to know if the program went as envisioned; whether goals were met, unrealistic, or not suitable; and if additions or changes are needed. Specific strengths and weaknesses are reviewed to learn what successes can be replicated and decide where improvements are necessary. Everyone involved in the program, from senior leadership to participants, should contribute to a list of lessons learned.

Taking all of these points into consideration is very important for establishing a mentoring program that benefits the individual participants and the organization. Mentoring programs can be a great asset to an organization, whether through the traditional model or the partnership model. They can increase engagement and retention of employees or members. Professional development can be provided across the organization, to share and retain valuable intellectual capital. In addition, a mentoring program also demonstrates how the company or organization values its employees and their professional and personal growth.
Introduction

Basic Characteristics of Mentoring

Traditionally in a mentoring relationship, a senior-level person provides guidance, support, and information for a younger person just beginning her career. Today, with several generations in leadership and workplace situations, diverse communications and professional styles are exhibited. Participants need to be authentic, open minded, and have empathy for other points of view in order to understand the challenges and opportunities that can be encountered in a mentoring relationship. Cross-generational mentoring is happening more frequently—people are acknowledging that everyone can benefit from assistance in some area and that everyone has some wisdom to exchange. Just growing up in different eras and seeing the world through different lenses can contribute to shared insights. In accepting this perspective, people are able to move their mentoring experience forward and have successful and rewarding interactions.

There are many types and styles of mentoring. Regardless of the model or form the mentoring program takes, each has comparable goals and objectives to help the participants increase knowledge, skills, and capacity. The basic purpose includes:

- developing skills and competencies for future career plans and professional capability
- exploring future career direction and work options
- providing a sounding board to listen and to ask the difficult question
- sharing life experiences, specifically those dealing with new or difficult situations
- giving support and encouragement to seek new challenges, not become discouraged, and persevere.

The difference is in how these components are combined, integrated, and put into action—their *modus operandi*. In a traditional model, the majority of these
elements go one way—down toward the junior or younger employee or member, the mentee. In a partnership model, all elements apply equally to each individual.

Characteristics of an Effective Mentor

Effective mentors are willing to commit to building productive and strong working relationships with their partner. They support the workplace values, mission, and goals. They bring their own unique organizational history and experience to a mentoring approach. In a traditional mentoring relationship, the mentor acts as role model.

Successful participants involved in a mentoring relationship are able and willing to:

- Spend meaningful time in focused give and take discussions.
- Create an environment that is comfortable for being open and honest about views, feelings, and opinions.
- Share knowledge about the organization and its “way of doing things.”
- Make introductions to people who can assist in achieving short-term professional and long-term career goals.
- Check periodically to ensure that expectations of both parties are in sync and realistic regarding the existing relationship.
- Allow feelings of frustration to be expressed and give candid and constructive feedback.
- Encourage the testing of new waters, trying out different roles, and practicing new skills.
- Follow through on agreements made.
- Provide access to informal communication networks.
- Expand opportunities for visibility.
• Review career objectives and plans for their achievement and offer suggestions for improvement.

• Reinforce “lessons learned” when failure occurs and that risk is OK.

• Celebrate achievements and successes.

Qualified participants for a mentoring relationship are:

• enthusiastic about another’s dreams and aspirations

• motivating and encouraging about the other person’s new challenges, changes, or difficulties

• open to sharing their experience with the other person about similar concerns, issues, or encounters

• empathic toward another’s feelings, ideas, and outlook

• supportive toward the other’s needs and concerns

• objective regarding the other person’s solutions and action plans.

Productive mentoring results in experiences that are quite rewarding, educational, enriching, and appreciated by both parties.

The Mentoring Partnership Approach

The Mentoring Partnership Model is distinctive because it is intentionally designed and planned to build relationships that provide two-way inclusive interactions exchanging insights, knowledge, and expertise, which result in mutual learning benefits for both participants regardless of generational or workplace status. The diversity of our generations, cultures, and experiences bring so many learning opportunities to the table. Why limit the learning to only one side of the conversation? In today’s society we say that we value diversity because it emboldens creativity and opens more ways to bring new ideas. Why shouldn’t this apply to taking
advantage of promoting individual and community learning? Why not use what we value—the diversity of knowledge and experience—to broaden our development?

As mentioned in the preface, the design of the Mentoring Partnership Model is based on the interactions we saw between the generations in our intergenerational conversation exercises. We saw their interest in what the other generation could teach them. Creating an environment that values what individuals contribute to the development of their colleagues enhances self-esteem and self-confidence. When someone comes to you to learn from you, this enhances your own feelings of self-worth. Too many times we (the senior members) determine that we must teach the junior. While there is always something to learn, do we acknowledge that the junior has knowledge that we could learn from? And also, if we seem to always be designated as the ones who must give and share knowledge, when do we learn?

This model provides a structure enabling two members of separate age groups to work as a team, assisting each other to improve and expand their strengths for themselves and their organizational success. This relationship involves a “give-and-take” style whereby people feel free and comfortable to express ideas and suggestions, ask for help, voice disagreements, and so forth. It is a connection whereby two people see themselves as colleagues bringing compatible learning styles and desired skills, experience, and knowledge to the relationship. A Mentoring Partnership team is an equitable association that connects two individuals bringing talents, skills, and experiences to the table, which the other person wants to acquire. Examples of learning that can occur include: passing on the organization's story, imparting technical skills, exchanging generational characteristics, advising how to fit into the organization's culture, and exchanging job skills across departments.
Individual and Organization Benefits

The participants involved in a Mentoring Partnership Program and the organization sponsoring the program benefit from it. Thus, it is a “win-win” situation enhancing both the individuals and the organization. Individual benefits:

- Receive desired customized learning in a one-on-one situation, convenient in time, place, and method.
- Create new and stronger bonds among colleagues.
- Expand knowledge, insights, and expertise in organizational, personal, and professional arenas as a two-way learning exchange.
- Develop larger professional networks by having access to a new range of contacts made possible by a mentoring partner.

Organization benefits:

- Inspire new talent to identify with the organization and its culture by building stronger ties and working relationships.
- Retain the engagement of senior-level members with opportunities to learn while passing on their legacies.
- Sustain engagement and prevent loss of emerging talent.
- Enhance leadership and succession planning.

To establish and build an effective and successful mentor partnership, guidelines and support resources are needed. This Guide (part I) provides the information, format, and exercises to plan, initiate, and coordinate a Mentoring Partnership Program for nonprofit/community-related, business/for-profit, and government employers. The Workbook (part II) introduces the participants to the program and discusses recommendations and tips for developing a meaningful and productive working relationship.
Flexibility of Venues

In addition to the workplace, this model can be applied in other arenas as well. Some examples include:

- Elementary through high school education: Senior-level and first-year teachers can form partnerships. First-year teachers have new and innovative techniques by virtue of being recent graduates; senior teachers have hands-on experience in the classroom and in the system.

- Higher education: Tenured faculty can learn the latest teaching trends and tools from junior faculty; while junior faculty can learn about the tenure process and its requirements.

- Trade and professional associations: Being a member of an association allows for opportunities to build relationships across the generations, resulting in continuous learning for senior members and for junior members as they gain networking possibilities and knowledge.

As mentioned previously, one specific and unique audience in professional associations are their senior members, who wish to continue to benefit from their membership as well as to continue to contribute to the association’s value. Therefore, it’s essential to be proactive in recruiting the more experienced and active members for involvement by stressing the two-way learning and exchange that will take place.