Pillars of modern mentoring

Randy Emelo defines modern mentoring. Less about experts passing on wisdom, more about learners sharing knowledge

A few years ago, I was asked to address about 250 organisational leaders at a global pharmaceutical company about the topic of modern mentoring. A senior leader introduced me to the audience with a very nice welcome and shared that mentoring had played a vital role in his career. He said that he was a true believer in the value and effectiveness of this type of learning, and that I was there to help them take mentoring to the next level. As I walked on stage, I thought to myself that with support at the top of the house for modern mentoring like that, this company's initiative is sure to succeed.

I kicked off my presentation by asking the leaders to participate in what I like to call the 'ask the expert' exercise. It is a participatory exercise I use when presenting to an audience on social learning or modern mentoring. Each person gets to play the role of a learner and solicit advice from two other people in the room regarding a work-related problem they are facing. They also get to play the role of adviser and advise two other people in the room based on their particular work-related issues. By having the audience actually participate in this practice, the concept of modern mentoring or learning from others becomes more tangible. It also helps to energise the crowd by igniting the possibilities for the practice's application in their workplace. This audience was engaged and excited as I began to get into the heart of my presentation, describing what modern mentoring is and how to use it or learning networks to support learning and development.

As I wrapped up my presentation and exited the stage, I was delighted to think that this group of leaders would go out with a solid understanding of the material and use it to really enrich their organisation's learning and development efforts. Unfortunately, my feelings of delight were short-lived. The senior leader who had introduced me came back on stage to thank me for my presentation and to discuss its relevance to the conversation at hand, or so I thought.

Instead, the senior leader dismissed my presentation with this short statement: "What Randy just described to you is not mentoring." I quickly realised that this leader did not understand or support the practice of modern mentoring and was still enmeshed in the traditional mentoring mind-set. Fortunately, this company had leaders who understood and embraced a modern mentoring mind-set, and modern mentoring has become the norm for the company.

But the fact remains that many people continue to hold antiquated opinions about mentoring, seeing it as only a one-to-one relationship with an older, more senior employee as the mentor and a younger, more junior employee as the mentee. They associate mentoring with a highly-structured and tightly-controlled programme that lasts between nine and 12 months, and to which people have to be invited to participate.

While many organisations still successfully use mentoring in this manner, this is not the only way that mentoring can occur in the 21st century. In truth, the purpose of mentoring has broadened, moving away from getting a handful of people ready for leadership roles and instead shifting to a practice that focuses on three key areas:

- increasing an organisation's intelligence (emotional, leadership, technical),
- enhancing an organisation's ability to compete, and
- accelerating employee development.

This shift in purpose means that more people

need to get involved in mentoring so that the workforce can keep pace with competitive and technological changes and spur the organisation ahead in innovative, profound ways. Companies have more to gain from a broader, more open programme and philosophy where knowledge, insights, and connections are shared across all levels and departments.

This gets to the heart of modern mentoring and to the evolving definition of mentoring. Modern mentoring is a form of open, social and collaborative learning. Everyone can participate, and people meet in large groups to learn from, and, share insights with one another. It broadens the scope from one-to-one and top-down connections, and makes them many-to-many and across all levels, functions, and locations. It is typically driven by the needs of the individuals participating, instead of the needs of the organisation, meaning that learning is self-directed. It also means that anyone can be an adviser (note that I didn't say mentor), regardless of their job title or tenure, and anyone can be a learner (again, note that I didn't say protégés or mentees).

Today's global complexity requires a nimble workforce that can adapt to rapid change, new demands and unforeseen challenges. To succeed, companies must constantly innovate. Providing your organisation's workforce with ways to connect, collaborate, learn from and share with their colleagues across all levels, locations and functions is critical – and it is the driving force behind modern mentoring.

The building blocks of modern mentoring

The following five core concepts form the foundation of modern mentoring:

- Open and egalitarian
- Diverse
- Broad and flexible
- Self-directed and personal
- Virtual and asynchronous.

Following these principles will help you get started as you create your own modern mentoring culture.

Open and egalitarian. As younger generations make their way into the workforce, they bring their beliefs and values with them. These can sometimes fly in the face of what organisations consider standard operating procedure, but it does not mean they are wrong. Some of the strongest voices of change come from millennials who want more openness and equality – both in their personal and professional worlds. This viewpoint plays very well with modern mentoring because for uninhibited and meaningful learning to take place, you must encourage an open environment where people have equal access to one another. Modern mentoring is built on the idea that everyone has something to learn and something to teach. In order to let knowledge flow freely and unimpeded, this type of unrestricted and egalitarian environment is essential.

Diverse. Diversity is what will help your modern mentoring programme thrive. Here, the use of diverse isn't limited to people of different genders, races, and ethnicities. Diversity also encompasses learning connections and relationships that cross functional, geographical, hierarchical and generational lines. Supporting diverse learning connections and participation will help form the foundation of a solid modern mentoring →

Reference

1 Malcolm Knowles, (1970). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy.* Association Press

People are more likely to be engaged, active learners if they choose what they learn and with whom they collaborate

culture. Different perspectives within mentoring communities help novel ideas and approaches arise in answer to problems faced by individuals or the organisation as a whole. People in a different functional area, geographical area or even from a different department or age group will likely view situations and issues through a distinctive lens and be able to offer a unique perspective and innovative solutions.

Broad and flexible. Seeking all of your answers and career advice from one person is outdated and inefficient, and I'm not the only one who thinks so. At the 2014 Skillsoft Perspectives Conference, Jack Welch said employees should see everybody as a mentor. He encouraged people to grab the best of what they like in multiple people and run with it, and he stressed that we should not get stuck in one person's mould. I agree. No one can possibly know everything, nor are they likely to want to participate in a mentoring programme if the expectation loomed that they would have to be an all-knowing sage.

Instead, modern mentoring breaks the cycle of the sage on the stage and pushes the idea of the guides on the side. Learning connections typically occur with multiple people who act as advisers and learners simultaneously, forming broad mentoring relationships. People can rotate in and out of these groups depending on who is available and willing to participate. Multiple learning connections and conversations can occur at the same time, allowing someone who is an adviser for one group to be a learner in another group because her level of expertise on the topics at hand will vary. Modern mentoring allows for this type of flexibility so that people can find the right learning connections at the right time, helping them find and apply insights on the job and bring about real results.

Self-directed and personal. Adults want to drive their own learning. Malcolm Knowles popularised this theory in the 1970s with his idea of andragogy, or adult learning theory[1]. Knowles argued that as people mature, they become more motivated to learn based on internal drivers, such as their own personal desire to learn about something, rather than external drivers, such as someone telling them they need to learn about something. He also postulated that as people age, experience becomes an increasing resource for learning and people seek to apply new insights immediately to solve problems. Jump ahead 40 years and you have the framework for modern mentoring.

People are more likely to be engaged, active learners if they choose what they learn and with whom they collaborate. With modern mentoring, you empower individuals to be in control of their learning and development. It enables employees to address their own personal, real-time learning needs by helping them find, connect with and gather insights from colleagues from anywhere within an organisation. They can gain skills that help them with their own unique work context and make them more productive in a given instance. Moreover, it's not just learners who benefit from this; advisers do as well. They can choose which topics and areas they offer their expertise in, and decide when and if they have the time to participate. This process puts the control back into the hands of the participants and lets them guide their own development.

Virtual and asynchronous. Modern mentoring is all about what is right - it pulls together the right people, at the right time, for the right conversations, to find the right solutions for any problem an organisation might face. Because of technological advancements, this can be done virtually and asynchronously. The people who would like to connect and learn from each other could be in different parts of the company, different cities, and even different countries. For this reason, modern mentoring often makes use of asynchronous communication and collaboration. Of course, there will be times when synchronous or instantaneous collaboration occurs, but those factors do not have to be present for modern mentoring to work. The growing use of technology for mentoring also means companies can scale the programme and offer it to everyone in the organisation at a reasonable price.

Modern mentoring can be summed up as mentoring without constraint. It removes barriers, eases administrative burdens, and broadens the impact mentoring can have by opening up participation to everyone within an organisation. Viewing mentoring as a practice for the masses will help you harnesses the collective knowledge, skills, abilities and passions of your entire workforce. **TJ**

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