

Setting up the Mentoring Programme

Some form of spontaneous mentoring takes place in most organisations, whether acknowledged or not. A formalised programme helps harness that energy to the organisation's objectives and extend the reach of mentoring to groups who might otherwise have been overlooked, while avoiding most of the downsides of informal mentoring. Well-designed programmes greatly enhance the benefits to both participants and the organisation.

It's easy to over-bureaucratise the mentoring programme, however. Ideally, there is just enough structure and support to ensure that:

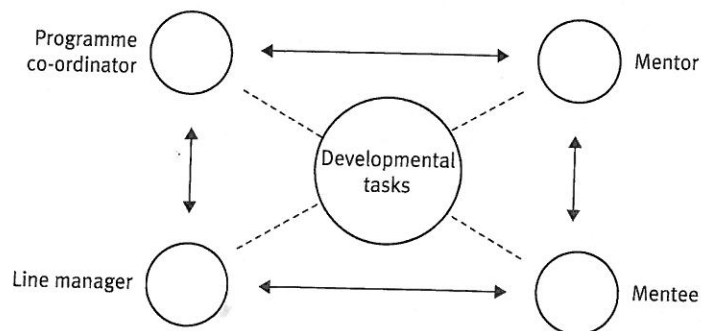
- mentors and mentees are reasonably well-matched
- they understand their roles and how the relationship evolves
- they have enough relevant skills and tools/resources to start with confidence
- the progress of each relationship is monitored so the programme manager can intervene, if needed
- participants feel that there is an alignment between the organisation's aims for the programme and their own
- top management understands the programme and can give appropriate support as needed.

THE MENTORING QUADRANGLE

There are usually four people involved in a mentoring relationship. Together, they make up a mentoring quadrangle:

- the mentee
- the mentor
- the line manager
- the programme co-ordinator, who monitors the relationships and looks at resources for training opportunities.

Figure 11 The mentoring quadrangle



The clearer all four are about the objectives and effort required, the more successful the programme will be. All must be involved and consulted about career moves and developmental tasks that will take the mentee away from day-to-day work and responsibilities.

Each organisation has to draw up a mentoring programme that fits its particular company culture and answers the needs of its own employees. To ensure the success of the mentoring programme, a company must be prepared to be flexible in its approach and be willing to assess continuously and, if necessary, modify the programme.

SETTING PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

As with any major corporate programme, it's important to have a clear statement of objectives against which progress may be measured. Typical objectives might be:

- to establish a cadre of broadly trained generalist managers at or just below middle management
- to speed and improve the induction of specific types of recruits and reduce wastage within the first year of their employment
- to allow top management to assess the ability of both individual young managers and the rising generation of managers as a whole
- to provide equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups of employees.

In each case, HR can establish with top management a set of assessment criteria and a timetable for achieving specific levels of results.

Putting these objectives into practice requires a great deal of preparation. Usually at least six months to a year is needed to gain acceptance of the concept from the key people in the organisation to establish objectives and measurements, to design support facilities, such as special training courses, and to begin the process of selecting participants.

PREPARING THE COMPANY FOR A MENTORING PROGRAMME

ORGANISATIONAL READINESS FOR MENTORING

An important element in designing the programme, especially in terms of the training provision and communication within the organisation, is to understand just how supportive the environment will be towards mentoring. How will mentors and mentees be perceived? Will line managers willingly let them spend time in mentoring meetings? Are there any cultural factors which might inhibit mentees from using the relationship appropriately?

In most of the programme failures I have seen, a major contributing factor has been not taking into account contextual factors that will undermine the programme.

Some examples that illustrate the point:

- A large UK-based financial services organisation found that its system of billable hours placed a major potential barrier in the way of mentors and mentees, because they would effectively be penalised for spending time on the relationship during official working hours. The solution was to produce a budget line specifically for time spent on the programme and to ensure that line managers understood the importance of making this available.
- The HR function in a UK national institution insisted that it knew exactly what the likely concerns of mentors and mentees would be and saw no need to conduct any research prior to training. Subsequently, it became very clear that the organisational culture made it difficult for the mentees – newly recruited graduates – to admit that they had any issues to deal with. They soon learned that projecting confidence and competence was essential, if their appointment was to be confirmed at the end of their two-year induction. The mentees also felt that senior managers, from whom the mentors were drawn, were remote and unapproachable, so they were reluctant to

disturb them with any problems they did have. The net result was that most relationships never really took off.

- An engineering company assumed that women managers would welcome a mentoring programme aimed specifically at them. Persuaded to do some initial research, it discovered that many of the women felt that labelling the programme as a women's initiative would devalue it, and that they would be less likely to take part.
- Good practice is to carry out a 'readiness for mentoring' evaluation that examines:
 - the overall developmental climate. Will mentoring fit in naturally, or will it require a lot more effort to get people to change perceptions and behaviours?
 - top management commitment
 - the recent history of self-development initiatives. Were they sustainable or regarded as another management fad?
 - other major initiatives by HR or the business that might compete for attention and resources with a mentoring programme in the timeframe planned
 - the past history (if any) of mentoring in the organisation.

ENSURE TOP MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

Top management needs to demonstrate to the rest of the company that it considers mentoring to be a legitimate and effective method of developing staff. Top management must support the programme verbally and materially. Ideally, they should be prepared to talk about their own experiences as mentors and mentees. It must promote mentoring within the company through speeches, letters, memoranda and articles in the company newsletter. Articles in the public media can reinforce the message greatly, because employees often take greater note of information they read in independent newspapers and magazines than they do of the same information presented in official company publications. Senior management can also attend general meetings of groups of mentoring pairs. These strategies are especially necessary if general unease, confusion, or even suspicion about the programme exists in the company.

ADAPT THE PROGRAMME TO THE COMPANY'S DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Try to fit the mentoring programme into the context of a wider framework of employee development and human resource management, and explain this framework to employees. Problems are more likely to arise if the programme exists in isolation. If it seems that mentoring is the only form of career development in the company, employees may easily assume that those chosen to participate are destined automatically for senior management and the morale of those not on the programme would suffer appreciably. Those individuals who are on the programme may be encouraged to believe that all their chances of promotion lie in the mentoring relationship. As a result, they may throw all their efforts into that area and neglect other equally important aspects of their work and personal development. To avoid these pitfalls, mentoring should be seen as only one dimension of career development.

The company should also make sure mentees have other opportunities to improve their skills beyond those arising within the mentoring programme. They should have access to internal or external workshops, self-development and distance-learning materials, as well as career development workshops.

ENSURE COMMITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Ensure that participation is voluntary. Mentoring demands time and effort so commitment is essential. Inform potential mentors of potential problems and challenges and what they should expect of the relationship. Some companies give all new mentors

and mentees the chance to hear from existing or recent participants about the pitfalls and pleasures mentoring can bring.

ENSURE SUPPORT SYSTEMS ARE IN PLACE

The most important of the support systems required are:

- Clear information about the purpose of the programme and who is eligible for it.
- Some basic information about mentoring and how to apply for the programme.
- A systematic, transparent system for matching mentors and mentees (see Chapter 6).
- A well-focused training programme for both mentor and mentee.
- Some form of mutual support mechanism, where mentor and mentee groups can meet from time to time to share experience and receive further advice or training.
- An intranet-based platform with lots of additional information about mentoring. (Mining company Anglo American has an extensive HR portal on its corporate intranet. Included in the resource is a database for mentors and mentees, as well as materials to support local HR professionals in being champions for mentoring in their locations around the world.)
- Supervision – more frequently associated with coaching, professional supervision is also now being used to support mentors. The London Deanery provides regular supervision for the medical professionals in its programme. Similarly, The Association of Danish Lawyers and Economists (Djøf), uses supervision in one of the largest mentoring programmes in Europe. Supervision provides an opportunity to:
 - continue to develop mentor skills
 - identify and deal with relationship problems
 - enable mentors to share concerns
 - identify common issues raised by mentees (in a number of cases, this information has led to substantial changes in HR policy or procedures)
 - ensure that the mentors understand and work within an ethical framework and respect boundaries.

Some companies have supported mentoring programmes with regular newsletters aimed at drip-feeding new concepts and tools. Where the programme has a large group of people all starting at the same time, these newsletters can be timed to coincide with likely transitions between stages in the mentoring relationship.

ENSURE ACCEPTANCE OF THE TIME INVOLVED

Make sure everyone understands the amount of time commitment involved on the part of the mentor, the mentee and the mentee's manager.

Two key questions that must be asked are:

- 1 How disruptive to the normal work of these people will the time commitment be?
- 2 How valuable will this time and effort be in achieving the objective of developing the mentee?

Two useful ground rules help to put the time issue into perspective:

- 1 If you meet less than once a quarter, you haven't got a relationship (it's just an acquaintance); if you meet much more than once a month, the mentor is probably doing the line manager's job.
- 2 Ideally, meetings should last 60–90 minutes. Below this, it's difficult to address issues in real depth. Above two hours and you are probably going round the houses. It can

be good practice to put an extra half hour into the diary to allow for those occasions when a really crucial issue comes to the surface towards the end of the scheduled time.

DEMISTIFY THE MENTORING PROGRAMME

Demystify the mentoring programme for those who are not involved. The process and objectives of the programme should be explained clearly, setting out and emphasising the benefits to the organisation as a whole. If it is decided to establish only a small number of mentoring pairs as a pilot at the beginning of a programme, the organisation should explain to applicants not included that they will have an opportunity to reapply in the future.

ENSURE CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is essential if the mentee is to open up to the mentor to produce the kind of frank relationship necessary for success.

Confidentiality in mentoring is rarely absolute. Leaving aside the issue of legal obligations (eg becoming an accessory after the fact), different organisations have different expectations of the level of confidentiality that can apply. At a City financial services company, top management has been careful to draw the distinction between privacy (being able to talk about issues in a relationship of trust) and confidentiality (the expectation that nothing said can be discussed outside the relationship without mutual agreement).

Clearly, the less confidence the mentee (let alone the mentor) has that what he or she says will remain between them alone, the more reluctant the mentee will be in speaking openly of his or her feelings and concerns. Said one mentee:

My line manager and my mentor play golf together every Sunday.

There are things I'd like to explore with the mentor, about how to tackle some of my manager's behaviours, but I'm never sure how much I dare say. If my manager thought I was criticising him behind his back, I'd have a real problem. As it is, twice now they have both made much the same suggestion to me about an issue I've brought up, which makes me suspicious that they have been discussing me.

Although issues of broken confidentiality are remarkably rare in mentoring, concerns over confidentiality remain one of the biggest limiting factors on relationships. Making the ground rules clear and trying, wherever possible, to avoid mentor and line manager being too close operationally or personally, are obvious practical measures to take.

It's also advisable to avoid role confusion. Some of the professional institutes, for example in engineering, have used mentoring for years as a means of assisting people on their route to chartered status. Most expected the mentor to carry out some form of assessment of the mentee, but this practice has gradually been dropped, not least because it introduced a dynamic into the relationship that made it difficult for the mentee to seek anything but technical advice – much of which was more readily available from other sources. Divorcing the measurement and mentoring processes enriches the relationships and helps build more rounded professionals.

While it's not essential to spend a lot of time on confidentiality in mentor and mentee training, it is important to discuss it enough to give people a flavour of the kind of issues that may occur. Here are some of those that I use in training:

- The mentee's boss asks him to pump the mentor for information about planned structural changes that might affect both of them and to share this later.
- The mentee's boss asks the mentor for information on the mentee's intentions.

- The mentee reveals that an unethical practice is going on in his department. Should the mentor escalate this? Or intervene herself?
- The mentor knows that a major change is about to happen in the mentee's department, of which the mentee is unaware, but will open up significant opportunities for the mentee. The mentee reveals they have had an attractive approach from a headhunter. How much should the mentor say?