

Organizational benefits of mentoring

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Executive Overview

When an older, more experienced member of an organization takes a junior colleague "under his or her wing," aiding in the organizational socialization of the less experienced person and passing along knowledge gained through years of living within the organization, a mentoring relationship is said to exist. Both principals in this type of relationship benefit in ways which have often been discussed and, accordingly, many companies have instituted formal mentoring programs. In this article, the authors examine the benefits which flow, not strictly to the individuals involved, but to the organization that fosters mentoring relationships. Principal benefits are the transmission of corporate culture and the provision of a "deep sensing" apparatus for top management. The design of mentoring programs, choice of mentors, and potential pitfalls of mentoring are discussed.

Short Subject

When Odysseus went off to fight the Trojans, he left an old and trusted friend in charge of his household and his son's education. Three thousand years later, when we speak of the process by which an older more experienced member of an organization counsels a younger colleague on the unwritten facts of life in that organization, the name of this trusted servant is often invoked. Odysseus' friend, Mentor, has been immortalized by the attachment of his name to this widespread form of intergenerational knowledge-sharing.

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The subject of "mentoring" has often been discussed, along with the benefits that accrue to the mentee and the mentor; however, the benefits that accrue to the organization that encourages mentoring within its ranks are referred to less often. To apply the Homeric analogy, most discussions of mentors have missed an explicit focus of the benefits received by Odysseus or, more generally, by the Kingdom of Ithaca, as a result of the first historically recorded (so to speak) mentoring relationship. This article addresses this subject directly, delineating what modern corporate Ithacas can hope to gain through the fostering of mentoring relationships.

It is probably a safe assumption that different types of organizations benefit in different ways and to various degrees from mentoring. It is also a safe assumption that the character of mentoring will change as the participants move up the corporate hierarchy. It is our opinion that mentoring is not and should not be a phenomenon restricted to lower or entry level personnel, but, rather, that it has a place at the very highest levels of organizations (as in the grooming of the next CEO). Within the context of these assumptions, we can examine the organizational benefits of mentoring.

Organizational Benefits of Mentoring

The most obvious and often discussed benefits are those related to the development of human resources. Mentoring can contribute to employee motivation, job performance, and retention rates. However, other important benefits are often overlooked. These are related to the long-term health of the

organization as a social system. One such contribution is that mentoring provides a structured system for strengthening and assuring the continuity of organizational culture. The existence of a strong corporate culture that provides members with a common value base, and with implicit knowledge of what is expected of them and what they in turn can expect from the organization, can be vital to organizational success and effectiveness. The mentoring system is also useful when the organization requires modification or redefinition of culture, i.e., during times of leadership succession. The alternative in many cases is to rely solely on an expensive, intrusive, and highly formalized monitoring and control system. Mentoring can thus be used as an adjunct to the typical performance appraisal and salary based sources of information about how well one is doing in the system.

Just as in traditional societies where tribal folklore and fables, each of which contains a "moral," are passed down from generation to generation, mentors in corporate cultures can pass down organizational folklore and fables. The culture-carrying myths and legends may be passed along without mentors, but a mentoring program can reinforce the diffusion process. Mentors can be trusted sources who lend credibility to these cultural stories. They can also put organizational myths in perspective and enlighten junior members as to their deeper meanings. This context-providing function can be especially important for myths which may reflect the less positive aspects of the organization's culture, such as units with ruthless top management. Such negative myths are never written down, but are often joked about.

In addition to being transfer agents of corporate culture, mentors also provide immediately practical services for their mentees. Such diverse "services" as informing their proteges of the best ways to navigate the subtleties of the organization's informal political system, acting as a sounding board for ideas with which a junior colleague might be hesitant to approach a supervisor, and even providing mundane advice about appropriate styles of dress, all fall within the purview of mentoring.

It is clear that mentors serve as nodes in an information transmission network. Data on this network runs in both directions. While the messages that mentors pass down will shape the future, the messages they send up can be vitally important also. This suggests another contribution of mentoring, the placement of "deep sensors" within the organization.

Mentors in their occasional role as deep sensors of workforce mood, attitude, etc., can transfer early warning signals to upper management long before news of such trouble becomes common knowledge, is communicated through formal channels, or manifests itself through reduced levels of performance. In discussing this deep sensing role, we are not suggesting that mentors should pass on specific information provided to them in confidence. Rather, we are suggesting that mentors are in a position to detect increasing levels of "noise" emanating from various quarters within the organization before it becomes figural or specific information.

The deep sensing role is made possible by matching mentors and mentees who are two to three levels apart in the organizational hierarchy and who are not in the same immediate chain of command. Information which might ordinarily be suppressed by direct middle level supervisors now has an opportunity to make an "end run" around those who would prefer to see it squashed. The separateness of mentor and mentee across levels of the organization can help prevent interference or undercutting of the direct supervisor.

In their role as sensors, mentors are not restricted to looking out for negative signals. Mentors are in a good position to spot talent which might not otherwise be noticed and to aid in the development of this talent. Mentors can work to draw out the best in young proteges who may for some reason lack the confidence or the ability to communicate their ideas and might otherwise be overlooked. Of course, mentors can also aid in the development of those "fast trackers" who are already acknowledged to be gifted.

Choosing Mentors

The questions of who should be mentors and how they should be chosen are extremely important. It is not always obvious in modern corporate societies who should play the role of "tribal elder." From the previous discussions of the deep sensing role, it seems that immediate supervisors would generally be unsuitable mentors for their underlings. The inherent conflict of interest and tension involved, particularly in the evaluative judging aspects of the supervisory role, could be likely to stifle meaningful communication. Sometimes the actions of a supervisor are topics which one might like to discuss with a mentor. Obviously, this opportunity would be compromised if the supervisor were the mentor.

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Likewise, managers positioned directly above the mentee's supervisor would also be awkwardly placed to be mentors. The mentor could be in the position of having to choose between providing support for the younger protege and undermining the authority of the protege's supervisor. Still, the mentor should be relatively close to the mentee in the organization. There must be a common base of shared experience from which the relationship can draw.

From another angle, the selection of mentors depends as much on individual personality development as on their position in the organizational hierarchy. Some people are not psychologically or positionally secure enough to give of themselves to the younger generation. They may see younger members of the organization as threatening competitors or as unworthy "brats." Others may have been embittered through their own experience in the organization. It would be deleterious to the mentee for either type of person to attempt to provide the personal guidance required by the mentoring function. It would be a mistake for the organization to assign these people to mentoring duties.

The increasing diversity of the workforce in contemporary organizations adds another dimension to the mentor-mentee matching problem. People naturally move to mentor and can more easily communicate with those with whom they most closely identify. If the prospective mentee looks somewhat like the potential mentor in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., the identification process becomes more immediate. If mentor-mentee matching is left to occur naturally, the danger is that quality mentoring may only be available to white males from dominant ethnic or religious groups rather than to the full range of people represented in the contemporary organization. Organizations implementing mentoring programs will likely need to provide special training and coaching of potential mentors of special groups such as women and minorities, if only to increase confidence and motivation to enter mentoring programs. Any such training program should explicitly deal with the dangers and unacceptability of sexualizing any mentoring relationship in any direction by either party.

Mentoring is an activity that can and should be promoted by the organization, but should never be required. The mentoring relationship must be a voluntary one, so mentors and mentees cannot simply be paired off by some higher authority. This may be a difficulty in establishing company-sponsored mentoring programs, but it is necessary to deal with this structure. Some people who would make the most

outstanding role models should be actively encouraged to become mentors (although those most suited may already be functioning as mentors informally). The other side of the coin is that some people may have to be quietly discouraged from mentoring. Outside consultants and senior human resource professionals might serve in the initiation and development of a working mentoring program.

Mentoring in the Upper Echelons

As stated previously, the value of mentoring is not restricted to the indoctrination or inspiration of entry-level personnel. Its value is maintained through the highest levels in the organization. At each level in the organization there is a new and different "subculture." As employees assume positions of increasing authority, they require new and different advice, and access to more closely held organizational secrets and realities become important.

When persons penetrate the uppermost reaches of the organizational hierarchy, their need for good mentoring does not cease, although it does assume another character. Far from being organizational novices in need of "socialization," advancing executives are well acquainted with the broad and complex corporate culture. However, there is another culture to which they must become accustomed. This is the culture of institutional leadership. Mentoring of executive-bound upper level staff will thus be occurring even as these staff take on mentoring roles of their own with younger employees. This further multiplies the impact of mentoring across the organization.

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Managers operating at the higher institutional levels of organizations must learn to think differently than those securely sheltered somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy. Ultimate responsibility now falls upon them. They must develop their own vision and learn how to share this vision with others. Elliot Jaques describes the increasing levels of psychological complexity required by managers as they rise through the organizational ranks.¹ As Jaques sees it, there are four levels of complexity, ranging from the lowest, manifested in the ability to deal with tangible phenomena, through capabilities with the symbolic and the intangible, and finally to the highest, a facility with universalistic concepts. Mentoring can help rising managers develop the integrative vision necessary to function at the universalistic level. The primary role of the mentor in the upper echelons is thus twofold. One part of this role is the sharing by the mentor of his or her own vision. This establishes a continuity of leadership. The other part of this role is to nurture within the mentee the confidence to develop his or her own vision. The latter is ultimately the more important and challenging function of mentoring which inspires creative growth and change for the organization.

Secondary roles of the institutional level mentor include assisting the newly arrived to adjust to life at this elite plane. This aspect of mentoring increases in importance when the class and social background of the mentee differs from peers at the institutional level of corporate leadership.

Mentoring the Mentors

It should not be forgotten that as mentees gain competence and move up the corporate ladder they may surpass their mentors. In a pyramidal-shaped organization, this must occur. Thus, the mentor-mentee relationship is not a lifetime one, nor is it exclusive. Over the years, mentoring relationships outlive their function and die out, and new ones form. An individual may have many mentors over the life of a career; a mentor may advise many proteges. It is also possible and, from the point of view of the authors, desirable that one person might function simultaneously as a mentor and mentee, as described previously.

How then is this complex web of interrelationships to be managed? Official and semi-official but sanctioned mentoring programs have been established by a

number of organizations with varying degrees of success. It is crucial to note that how the program is established has much to do with the success of the program itself. Junior managers especially must trust the benign intent of the organization's senior managers and be provided with the degree of autonomy that they need to open themselves to mentors. Without building trust, they will not make themselves sufficiently vulnerable to the mentor so that the mentor can assist with meaningful and non-trivial aspects of personal and managerial development.

If a mutual interest exists between a prospective mentor-mentee pair, a contract specifying the procedures and norms of the relationship should be agreed upon. This informal, but contractual, step is especially important for women and minorities and should include such seemingly mundane issues as whether doors will be open or closed during meetings, who can initiate meetings, and whether meetings can be held off-site, etc.

A fairly typical design for instituting a mentoring program at the entry level or one or two levels higher in the organization frequently takes the form of a "sponsored but voluntary" effort. Sometimes potential mentors and mentees are identified through survey or "hotline" sign-up procedures, with matching and interviews proceeding until "matches" are made. More promising is a formal design in which interested persons are gathered together for snacks and coffee or wine and cheese accompanied by an "inspirational" introduction of the program and concept by the CEO or other high ranking officer. Internal or external consultants handle the actual process of the meeting, which involves an explanation of the process of mentoring and its benefits, along with a period of informal "milling about" during which potential mentors and mentees can meet and assess each other. Multiple meetings may have to be held to include everyone interested and yet keep the number of participants down to a workable size. A second training session of two to four hours is appropriate in which the benefits, opportunities, and dangers of mentoring are fully aired. Details of how to initiate and, importantly, dissolve mentoring relationships should be discussed.

People who wish to become mentors should make public a listing of times when they will be available for fairly brief interviews. Mentees should be encouraged to call on and consider four to six potential mentors. They should interview their whole culled listing and not settle for the first agreeable person. If a mutual interest exists between a prospective mentor-mentee pair, a contract specifying the procedures and norms of the relationship should be agreed upon. This informal, but contractual, step is especially important for women and minorities and should include such seemingly mundane issues as whether doors will be open or closed during meetings, who can initiate meetings, and whether meetings can be held off-site, etc. It is a good idea to hold an additional general meeting after the first batch of matched pairs have begun to work together to check progress and address any problems which may have developed. Managers or consultants can serve as counselors for pairs who are experiencing difficulty. After several matching cycles, mentoring may become spontaneous as the organizational culture accepts it as a norm that mentoring is "good for us" and those both able and willing consider it part of their job.

Whatever the specific procedures employed to institute a mentoring program,² there must exist some mechanism for the establishment—as well as for the polite termination of mentoring relationships. Termination is sometimes difficult, but both parties must realize that just as the child grows up and leaves the parents, so too must mentee leave his or her mentor. Yet, the mentor remains a part of the former mentee, just as the parent remains a part of the adult child; the values of the current generation are carried on by the next. The former mentor can take some satisfaction from the role of shaping the organizational character of the younger person. The latter may feel a sense of gratitude toward the former mentor. Overall, these interrelationships only serve to strengthen the bonds with the organization.

Unintended Consequences

Any program as significant and powerful as an effectively designed mentoring program may well have some unintended negative consequences. One such problem is that the organizational values passed on through mentoring may

already be obsolete or on the road to obsolescence in an age of rapid technological, economic, and social change. It might be argued that mentoring could actually stifle the fresh insights brought into the organization by new members. However, the problem of the adaptation of the organizational culture to an environment in flux is something that should be addressed within the larger context of organizational change. A mentoring program may not be of much help with this issue, except in so far as mentors, by virtue of their experience, can sense the change that is occurring and advise mentees accordingly or conversely, mentees can open the eyes of their mentors to new environmental realities.

Concerning consequences more specific to the mentoring process, we are sure that there are many individual cases of mentoring gone awry in idiosyncratic or unusual ways. These unfortunate occurrences often have their beginnings in poor "matching" or improper or incompetent behavior on the part of either the mentor or mentee (e.g., a sexualizing of the relationship). Sometimes mentors pass on incorrect, incomplete, or politicized information based wholly on their own opinions or the viewpoints of the particular office "clique" to which they belong. It is the responsibility of the designers of the organizational policy concerning mentoring to establish selection, training, and reward mechanisms that foster fairness, competence, and discretion on the part of mentors.

Conclusion

Organizations should come to see mentoring as a strategy for the future and approach it as such. Odysseus knew his son needed to be prepared to assume the duties of leadership, and he recruited the original mentor to provide this preparation. Modern day corporations must provide the guidance required by future generations of leaders so they too are prepared to take command. Obviously, effective mentors should be rewarded for making a central contribution to the organization. Mentoring is a way to speed the development of talent. It is also a way to spot talent that might otherwise be overlooked sometimes by bosses who are hoarding human talent to bolster their own success. Further, it is simply the best method of passing along the norms, values, assumptions, and myths that are central to an organization's successful survival.

It is not only the small percentage of young managers who will someday reach the ranks of VPs and CEOs who benefit from the promotion of mentoring. The entire organization benefits not only because its leadership has been carefully groomed, but also because a strong culture has been developed and transmitted. This strong culture assures that past lessons and successful core values will not be forgotten and that excessively rigid, bureaucratic systems can be avoided. Furthermore, the organization with an extensive informal mentor-based information network can be more responsive to brewing internal controversies, discontent, and latent opportunities. These benefits can only serve to enhance an organization's prospects for future success.³

Endnotes

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¹ Elliot Jaques, *Requisite Organization: The CEO's Guide to Creative Structure and Leadership*, (Arlington, Va.: Cason Hall and Co., 1989)

² There are other ways of promoting mentoring besides the formal matching procedures discussed. Reward systems, educational interventions, and job assignments can all facilitate mentoring relationships. Interested readers should consult the book by Kathy Kram cited below.

³ Readers seeking further information and insights on the subject of mentoring may be interested in a new journal, *Mentoring*

International, published in Vancouver, British Columbia. The following books are also available:

Nancy W. Collins, *Professional Women and Their Mentors: A Practical Guide to Mentoring for the Woman Who Wants to Get Ahead*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983).

Kathy E. Kram, *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life*, (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1985).

A. Missirian, *The Corporate Connection*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1982).

Linda Phillips-Jones, *Mentors and Proteges*, (New York: Arbor House, 1982).

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