

What is Mentoring, Anyway?

Staying marketable, and being successful in the workplace usually involves developing your skills through the help of a Mentor. The Oxford Dictionary describes a mentor as “an experienced and trusted adviser”. That is wonderful to have, but what is it that a mentor has to offer you?

A mentor can be a valuable sounding board to hear about your workplace issues or concerns. He/she can also assist you in your career development, as people learn best on the job with constructive feedback and coaching. (our executive search experience denotes that this, in fact, is a major reason for employee dissatisfaction and turnover). The mentor helps people learn to accept feedback in a positive manner, knowing it is intended to be of benefit to them. By mentoring, we help guide that person’s successful movement within the company. The “reward” may be nothing other than intrinsic benefits in knowing the “mentee” is better off for having undertaken this step.

Mentoring makes the transfer of knowledge happen by intention, not by chance. It is the key to generating both new and renewed strength in the corporation. Looking at it from the company’s viewpoint:

- As a mentor, you will eventually help people set up a process to develop themselves, aside from any company assistance they may receive
- It will prompt you into evaluating your staff “bench strength”, and identifying what is necessary for succession planning, aside from the benefits the Employee receives
- You may also enable an Employee to develop beyond the point they felt they were capable of, improving their self-esteem and loyalty to the company

You can go about this by putting people into projects intended to “stretch” them. These could involve cross-functional duties as well as the work discipline they know best. The process must include clear communication of duties and expectations, but just as important is a formal feedback process. Review their progress regularly; these regular meetings will help to solidify their learning and also help to plan the next steps. This should take place in a written action plan that both parties can access. Ask them what they feel they have done well, and what can be improved to make them buy into the process and self-accountability will develop.

Feedback from others (even Peers and Subordinates) can help; done anonymously, it becomes a powerful 360-degree feedback tool. Organizations such as GE are famed for using this process, where all Executives are trained to act as mentors so that each division has mentors available for all employees (new hires to division heads).

From the individual’s standpoint, you should first identify a mentor by thinking about the various people you know; they may be work colleagues, trusted friends, family, teachers, etc. One can have multiple mentors too; different perspectives can only add to the developmental mix. You may have already expressed an interest to them to understand how you are doing at work.

- You'll first have to ask them if they can commit to the time required. This is a serious exercise for both parties, so there is no use beginning something both sides can't live up to
- Be clear with them as to what kind of assistance or advice you are looking for; assuming you already have a Boss, and that is not the intended role here
- Talk regularly; thankfully, with the age of technology, this may take place with a combination of personal meetings, emails or phone calls
- Make efficient use of time, providing them with an update since the last meeting

Don't forget to thank your mentor for taking the time to help you; this is for your benefit, not theirs. If you found them helpful, let others know as well. Good luck!

Wolf is President, Wolf Gugler & Associates Limited, specializing in executive search and management appraisals for Hardware and Housewares Retailers and their Suppliers. He can be reached at (416) 386-1719 or by email at wolf@wolfgugler.com