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Mentoring: Is It All What It's Cracked Up to Be?

by Cindy Forbes

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Over the past several years, mentoring has become a hot topic in literature. Having a mentor during the early part of a person's career has been heralded by some authors as one of the keys to becoming a success. Many companies, in an attempt to develop future managers as well as to integrate an increasingly diverse work force into their corporate culture, have adopted formal mentoring programs.

Mentoring—a key to success?

Research has found that mentored people are more successful in organizations. However, it is not clear whether the mentoring causes the success or whether successful people attract mentors.

A mentor means different things to different people. A mentor can be seen as a sponsor, guru, counselor, teacher, advisor, guide, tutor, or coach. The role the mentor plays depends on the mentor's style, the goal of the mentoring program (if a formal program is in place) and the needs or desires of the person being mentored. The mentor may serve as an added source of information, encouragement, career counseling, and as someone with whom to discuss problems.

On the surface, it appears that in such a relationship all the benefits flow to the one being mentored. Research shows, however, that mentors derive many benefits as well. The mentor gains access to the protégé's energy and creativity. In addition, the protégé can offer the mentor vital information about other parts of the company, serve as a sounding board for ideas, or help the mentor finish a project. Mentors also may experience a sense of

completion from sharing their knowledge and experience to help others get started in the company.

Companies recognize that mentoring is beneficial to the organization as well. Mentoring often contributes to the development of managers, increases productivity, reduces turnover, and



enhances communications between all levels and sectors of the organization. Additionally, mentors help integrate new employees into the organization and build a sense of belonging for their protégés. More corporations are using formal mentoring programs to help them deal with emerging social and economic trends. Specifically they expect mentoring programs to:

- Help attract and retain workers during the coming labor shortage
- Help integrate the percentage of females, blacks, and other minorities into their corporate culture
- After an acquisition, integrate the managers of the acquired company into its culture

Potential problems

Corporate-sponsored mentoring programs are increasing. But are mentoring programs and relationships a panacea? Problems can develop that diminish their effectiveness. First, mentoring relationships, like any others, can go sour, leaving protégés exposed if they haven't developed other ties in the organization. Second, they can lead to a continuation of the "old boy" network and to over-protection. Finally in an ad hoc mentoring system, mentors tend to adopt protégés who seem most likeable and similar to themselves, which may lead to discriminatory behavior.

Of course, one of the biggest obstacles to mentoring, unless you're part of a formal mentoring program, is developing these relationships.

Mentoring experiences

ManuLife Financial began a formal mentoring program for actuarial students and new Fellows about a year ago. The mentors are senior actuaries and each has a group of about four individuals. The group approach allowed every student and new Fellow to be included in the program. The goal was to foster our historically strong actuarial community within the company.

Without the structure of a formal program I'm not sure if I would have volunteered to be a mentor. I've given advice when asked and I had considered mentoring students and staff with whom I felt a natural affinity. Given the press of daily demands, however, these altruistic ideas usually were placed on the back burner. Also, I always experience some trepidation at the idea of giving other people advice, asking myself, "Who am I?" and "Do I really know what is best for this individual?" After all, I live or die by the advice I give myself, but not the advice I give to others.

While a formal program ensures
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commitment, it creates other areas of concern for a new mentor: Will I get along with the individual in my group? Will they have the same interest and commitment that I must have?

After a year as a mentor, I have discovered that my fears were unfounded and that I have experienced many of the benefits cited by the research. My group has discussed diverse subjects, such as career development, strategic planning, and stress management. We've also had guests who discussed operations in other parts of the company. I believe I'm much more in touch with the concerns and issues facing our actuarial students than I was before.

A few months ago, we surveyed the students and new Fellows in the program to find out whether they believed the program was beneficial. With the exception of a couple of participants, the

program was viewed as worthwhile and something they wanted to continue.

On reflection, I realize I have had "friends" over my years at ManuLife to whom I could turn for advice and counsel. Until now, I had never thought of them as mentors. From this perspective, I offer the following advice to those of you in the early part of your careers:

- Having a "friend" or mentor who knows the company and has years of experience is very helpful.
- Don't be afraid to seek advice from senior employees whom you know and trust. They'll be flattered rather than offended.
- If you have mentoring-type relationships with individuals at your company, remember that the benefits will be proportionate with the effort you make in developing and sustaining them.



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