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Thinking About Mentoring

1. Note down and then reflect on:

- The names of people who have influenced you at various points in your life. You may or may not have actually met them.
- The important lessons you learned from these people.
- Your view of the attributes needed to make a good mentor.
- The extent to which you feel you yourself possess these qualities.

2. Answer the following questions about your current organisation. You may want to discuss them with colleagues too.

- Is there a mentoring program in your organisation? If so, how is it organised?
- Do you have a mentor? If so, are they inside or outside your organisation?
- Do 'mentoring skills' form part of the criteria for promotion in your organisation?
- Does your organisation provide training in how to be an effective mentor (for instance, as part of a leadership program)?

Who was Mentor?

The story of Mentor comes from the 'Odyssey', an Ancient Greek poem written by Homer in the eighth century B.C. When Odysseus, King of Ithaca, went to fight in the Trojan War, he asked his good friend, Mentor, to be a wise teacher and guide to his young son, Telemachus.

When the war ended, Odysseus set out for home, a journey that was to take him ten long years and many adventures. Eventually, father and son were reunited. From this very old story we have the word 'mentor' and its modern meaning of trusted advisor, wise teacher and good friend.

What does it mean to be a mentor to someone?

Mentoring is a fundamental method of developing a younger person's skills and insights through their association with someone older, more experienced and (hopefully!) wiser. Mentors are those special people in our lives who help us to grow, learn and fulfil our potential.

Coaching is often confused with mentoring but there is an important distinction. A mentor is usually an expert in your field and supports someone more junior, helping them to gain skills and experience.

In contrast, a coach does not necessarily belong to your field. Their role is much more concerned with supporting your self-directed and goal-oriented learning. These days, coaching is a profession in itself and requires training and qualifications.

Why should you have a mentoring program?

A well-researched benefit is the sharing and retention of knowledge. Many studies demonstrate how learning can happen very effectively outside of formal programs and courses. Learning through working alongside someone (who is more of an expert than you) can have considerable impact, as a result of the very personal relationship and focus that can develop.

This can cross age barriers and include what is often called 'reverse mentoring', where younger employees impart knowledge to older workers, for example around internet technologies.

A second type of benefit is where an organisation uses mentors to create cultural continuity, for instance in a nationally or internationally dispersed organisation. Companies with a clear sense of vision, values and strategy have a distinct competitive advantage. In addition, UGM research shows that employees' connection to the organisation's purpose positively impacts on their sense of belonging and their willingness to contribute. Mentors can be used to communicate consistent messages in these business-critical areas.

THE MAGIC OF MENTORING

Thirdly, mentoring helps to retain talent in your organisation. When talented individuals are given senior mentors, the evidence is that turnover amongst this group significantly drops: they feel an emotional commitment to the organisation and are inclined to stay. This benefit flows two ways. More senior people also learn from their mentees. They build a more realistic picture of what's going on in the organisation and a sharper sense of what's going wrong as well.

Mentoring and your D&I Strategy

A final type of benefit concerns diversity. Mentoring programs that deliberately reach out to groups (such as women or those with another culture in their background) can have a powerful effect. Networks are built, visibility is increased and ambitions are nurtured. Over time, a well-designed mentoring program can encourage the flow of more diverse talent upwards into leadership positions.

In this context, it is worth noting that a small but significant study on mentoring as the 'key to equality' was published in this week's BRW. Finalists and state winners in the 2010 Telstra Business Women's Awards were surveyed. 83 per cent said mentoring was an essential element of a positive organisational culture. Almost two thirds of these high achieving women acknowledged that they had enjoyed the benefits of a mentor during their business careers. They asserted that mentoring young women could prove more valuable than quotas in improving gender equality at senior levels across all sectors.

UGM conducted 26 in-depth interviews with senior executives, as part of a larger project on D&I. We found that virtually all those we spoke to mentioned the positive role played in their lives by mentors. They talked about their mentors with obvious warmth and gratitude. But there was an interesting difference between men and women. While both groups described their mentors' 'guidance' and 'advice', the women also stressed the effect of having a senior individual who believed in them, encouraged their ambitions and, at times, championed them when they were seen as risky outsiders.

But not all mentoring programs deliver ROI!

Our own research highlights the importance of good design, thorough preparation and sound briefings for both mentors and mentees. For instance, matching suitable pairs is vital – and a 'no fault divorce' system to deal with poor matches. Clashes in assumptions and expectations are another area of weakness that undermines many programs. UGM has found that mentees tend to need more orientation than mentors. A successful mentoring program requires a practical toolkit for both parties!