



WHY MENTORING IS MAKING A STRONG COMEBACK

Why mentoring can go wrong

With the increase in mentoring has come raised interest in studying the efficacy of the development approach. Not all programs are successful! Here's a list of what can go wrong

1. Organisations that see mentoring as a near costless exercise that needs little support often reap what they sow! Low investment equates to limited returns and, sometimes, even significantly negative outcomes.
2. Mentoring involves a set of expectations and skills relative to the mentee and the mentor. Inexperienced program managers often fail to recognise this and, when these skills are not developed or refreshed, any good mentoring outcomes are more by luck than by design.
3. Mentoring is not for everyone. The guiding role is played by the mentor who must be up for the job. That said, the mentoring relationship is a two-way street and mentee attitudes and behaviour can also contribute to a less-than-satisfying mentoring experience.
4. Mentors and mentees need support for the duration of the mentoring experience that facilitates the relationship and any learning transfer.

What exactly is mentoring?

Mentoring most often involves a person on a development journey (mentee) receiving support over an extended period from someone with considerable, usually hard-earned, experience (mentor). The term comes from a story in Homer's 'Odyssey' (a major Ancient Greek epic poem, not an episode of the Simpsons!)

Essentially, a king goes off to the Trojan War, knowing he will be away for many years. He asks his good friend Mentor to guide his young son during that time. From this very old story we have the word 'mentor' and its modern meaning of trusted advisor, wise teacher and good friend. Note that Mentor's role was different from a tutor.

Is mentoring the same as coaching?

While there are definite similarities, there are also important differences. Both approaches frequently involve pairs of individuals, one more experienced with knowledge to transfer and one seeking development. In the case of business coaching, the coach may or may not have direct technical knowledge of a particular field.

Managers, for example, are encouraged to adopt a coaching approach to help develop their people. Just like a sports coach, they'll set goals, assess capability and provide training, and then follow up and evaluate performance. Alternatively, the coach may be someone who doesn't have technical knowledge of the work being done but instead uses a variety of support tools, for example, techniques that facilitate reflection and learning. This mode of coaching has become so prevalent that it is considered a profession requiring training and qualifications.

Wisdom comes at a price and mentoring returns that value

Mentors, in contrast to coaches, are experienced individuals who are willing to share their experience, expertise and accumulated wisdom to help people who are less experienced get ahead. They're not ordinarily the mentee's boss or someone closely associated with their performance appraisal. Mentors with sector expertise typically provide quite different learning opportunities from coaches.

One distinct benefit is mastery. Experts with many thousands of hours of experience in a particular field establish millions of mental patterns in their context over time that help them process vast quantities of incoming information more efficiently and effectively. Thanks to these hard-earned patterns, they can usually more quickly and accurately than novices determine the nature of the current context, identify what data they should focus on (and what is just 'noise'), and decide best responses, based on what's worked for them before.

While experts don't always get it right, evidence shows they consistently do a lot better than novices in the same context. A mentee who shares their current challenges with a sector experienced mentor gains not only sound advice but potentially also access to some of the mentor's accumulated patterns, which can become their own. To close the learning transfer loop, it is obviously important for the mentee to be able to implement their new insights and behaviours. They'll likely hone their skills iteratively, by rapidly implementing an agreed approach and then evaluating outcomes with their mentor.

The value of trusted authority

Are there any successful organisations that have no focus whatsoever on performance? Probably not! Consequently, we are all mindful that discussing strengths and weaknesses in our regular business context may not always be a career-enhancing move. This is regrettable because, all other things being held constant, reflecting frankly on these matters can have a profoundly positive impact on progress.

Enter the mentor! Another distinct value the mentor provides is that of confidential sounding board for the mentee, focusing primarily on particular business challenges or areas for improvement. Inevitably there will also be some personal changes to make and the mentor is there to support the mentee through the change process in ways that a boss probably can't.

Benefits of well-run mentoring programs

Mentoring went out of focus for a while, but has enjoyed a resurgence in a post GFC world, where development resources were at least initially somewhat constrained. There was also likely recognition that businesses had seen a lot of deep-experience walk out the door.

But it's not all bad news. In fact, mentoring has been shown to be a particularly powerful means of promoting inclusion and supporting diversity initiatives within organisations. Some studies suggest it is among the most successful diversity initiatives. However, mentors and mentees need to be carefully selected and matched, properly prepared for the experience and supported for its duration.

Recent studies show that good mentoring programs help mentees understand their role better, apply themselves more effectively and, as a consequence, feel greater commitment to their organisation. Also, as would be hoped, mentoring is positively associated with career progression (promotion and increased remuneration) and retention.

Benefits aren't limited to the mentee. Senior leaders who are mentors report increased job satisfaction, greater reflection on own practices and knowledge and deeper appreciation of different parts of the organisation.