

GUIDE TO INFORMAL MENTORING

Establishing a Network of Mentors

An Expanded Definition of Mentoring

In today's fluid workplace, we may often have several significant people who play a role in guiding our professional growth. The idea of a "network of mentors" is an alternative to the traditional practice of having one primary mentor-protégé connection.

Tips for Cultivating Mentors

A great deal of our professional growth stems from interaction with others and mutual learning. A good career management strategy is to create a "developmental relationship" when the opportunity presents itself.

As you prepare to ask a colleague to serve as an informal mentor, please consider the suggestions that follow:

Goals

In establishing a mentor partnership, carefully evaluate what you need. For example, what specifically would you like to accomplish?

- Learn a specific skill?
- Gain exposure to a process, project, or job role?
- Have a confidante outside your regular work environment?
- Have a sounding board to test ideas and proposals?

Setting goals is critical to the success of your mentoring partnership. Goals give the partnership a distinct purpose and help you organize and articulate your expectations. Well-defined goals help determine the work done together, maintain the focus of the relationship, and once accomplished, signal the achievement of what you set out to do.

Time

A key aspect of establishing a mentor-type relationship is defining expectations about contact time.

- How frequently will you meet?
- Is there a regular schedule or will conversations be ad hoc?
- How long will the relationship last?
- How do you determine closure?

Confidentiality

Depending on the focus of the mentoring relationships, it is very useful to discuss the level of confidentiality expected in the partnership

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Roles for Mentors in Your Network

You may have several colleagues in your professional network who serve in a mentoring capacity. Each may play a different role in influencing and supporting your development. That particular role will evolve from your needs and their interests. Individuals in your network will have different preferences about what they can provide. The following list differentiates mentor roles. Most mentoring partnerships will reflect a combination of these different roles.

Communicator

- Encourages two-way exchange of information
- Acts as a sounding board for ideas and concerns
- Establishes an environment for open interaction
- Schedules uninterrupted time to meet

Advisor

- Works with mentee to identify career-related skills, interests and values
- Helps evaluate appropriateness of career options and recommends strategies for career direction
- Helps identify obstacles to career progression and appropriate actions
- Communicates the informal and formal realities of progression in the organization
- Recommends training opportunities from which the mentee could benefit
- Periodically reviews the mentee's development plan

Coach

- Helps clarify performance goals and developmental needs
- Teaches managerial and technical skills (on the job)
- Recommends specific behaviors to reinforce effective performance
- Clarifies and communicates organizational goals and objectives
- Leads by example and serves as a role model to demonstrate successful professional behaviors

These functions are similar to those that a manager will typically perform. An informal mentoring relationship can supplement not substitute for formal management.

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Broker

- Expands the mentee's network of professional contacts
- Helps bring together different colleagues who might benefit by helping each other
- Helps link mentee with appropriate educational or employment opportunities
- Helps identify resources required for career progression

Advocate

- Intervenes on the mentee's behalf representing his or her ideas to higher-level management.
- Arranges for the mentee to participate in high-visibility activities within or outside the organization

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Mentoring Myths

Myth #1: The mentor owns and manages the partnership.

Fact: Successful partnerships are owned and managed by the mentee. The mentee is responsible for scheduling the meetings and preparing ahead of time. The mentor is responsible for finding time to meet with his/her mentor. The mentee should prepare for each meeting with an agenda and questions for the mentor. The mentor provides advice and feedback to help the mentee meet his/her goal.

Myth #2: Mentoring is something a mentor does to a mentee.

Fact: Mentoring arises out of an effective relationship between two people. Both the mentee and mentor have a mutual commitment to build the partnership in order to meet the mentee's goals.

Myth #3: Mentoring partnerships are always a perfect match.

Fact: Not all matches are a perfect fit. It is the responsibility of the employee and mentor to communicate with each other if the relationship is not working well. Agreeing to have a no fault-out option is an excellent idea. For example, if things are not working out, you can both respectfully agree to discontinue the relationship. This should not reflect negatively on either person.

Myth #4: Mentoring is time consuming.

Fact: Mentoring is a partnership and like any type of relationship, it requires dedicated time. However, you can optimize your time together by agreeing on a development agenda, clear goals, level of confidentiality, and a meeting schedule. Both the mentee and mentor should identify ways to integrate mentoring activities into daily work experiences.

Myth #5: Mentoring partnerships last a lifetime.

Fact: Mentoring partnerships should only last as long as it takes for the mentee to achieve his/her goals. At the end of the agreed upon timeframe of the partnership, the mentee and mentor may decide to continue or end the partnership.

Myth #6: Mentoring is based on chemistry.

Fact: An effective mentoring partnership is a relationship built on mutual respect, trust and honesty. The mentee and mentor do not need to become best friends.

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Myth #7: Mentors are many years older than the mentee.

Fact: Mentors should be selected based on their experience, knowledge, skills, and ability to share what they know. Some of these qualities come with age but not always.

Myth #8: Mentoring meetings must be face-to-face.

Fact: Mentoring can be accomplished through means other than face-to-face meetings. Once a solid foundation for the partnership is established, meeting via telephone or e-mail becomes easier.

(Adapted from Triple Creek Associates, Open Mentoring 2001 and Linda Phillips-Jones, The New Mentors & Proteges, 2001)