The Importance of Mentoring

Eric Perlstein May, 2016

graduating college

When I graduated college, one of the best insights my father ever provided me was to have a mentor throughout my professional development, but I did not take the time to appreciate his guidance. However, it did resonate with me and I have found myself remembering his advice often.

what have I learned?

I have learned that a mentoring relationship is a win-win for all involved: The employee who seeks a mentor and the mentor and organization that employ the pair. Here I will discuss why mentoring makes business sense, how to find mentoring, benefits from mentoring, and succeeding with mentoring.

interest in mentoring

There is interest in mentoring, so it became quickly apparent that it was going to be a huge amount of work to match people into the right pairs. There was this amazing convergence between mentoring and young professionals who seek guidance/direction.

I have experienced firsthand the issues identified with the frustration of young professionals can be resolved or minimized by leveraging mentoring both within their respective organization as well as through participation with professional societies.

good mentors are intelligent, encouraging, generous, and honest

the best mentors are usually direct, hold high expectations, and are willing to share social capital

the most critical characteristic is a mentor who can highlight the skill and ability

a great mentor is someone who can reach in and help the mentee release that hidden talent
advantages of mentoring

I am a huge fan of mentoring, and an advocate of performance measurement through professional development. I have never seen or experienced measurement tracking and reporting that supported mentoring before other than supporting a career path through attaining specific credentials, continuing education, and new job opportunities. Initial advances do emphasize mentorships contributed to career advancement, satisfaction, and salary attainment. Over the last 10 years, I have found great success through my connectivity with PMI globally and with the Baltimore Chapter of PMI; providing mentoring to high school and college students through our partnerships with UMBC, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and Morgan State University. Included with this success, reaching out to the millennial generation augments the legitimacy to access their informal social and communication networks. The key reality is having a mentor who is willing to introduce and vouch for the mentee in senior leadership circles within the organization and in the professional society, which establishes demand and supply for mentoring.

how to obtain mentoring: 5 steps to a mentoring relationship

Most organizations do not have a formal mentoring program. So the question becomes, how can an individual employee reach out and find a mentor? Instead of asking someone to be your mentor, I would suggest a multi-pronged approach using these five steps.

1. Identify why you need a mentor. Reasons might include:
   - Connections, introductions, visibility, job skills, industry knowledge, management skills, and communication skills
   - Help with goal setting and problem solving
   - Psycho-social support for work-family pressures, discrimination, coping with disappointment, and/or developing self-esteem

2. Consider who might have the characteristics of a good mentor and would assist with your identified needs in a mentoring relationship.

3. Create an outreach plan to find your mentor
   - Check for a corporate mentoring program with your HR or training department
   - Identify and approach a senior leader
   - Look within community organizations
   - Network at conferences and seminars
   - Ask for referrals within industry groups
   - Reach out using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn
   - Consider someone you highly respected at a former employer

4. Decide how you will introduce yourself and request the mentoring relationship.
   - Contact the potential mentor via phone, email, meeting, social media, or a letter
   - Include in your introduction: the specific reason you thought this person would make a good mentor for you, you understand that the person is busy and you will expect only a reasonable amount of time from them, the areas you would like to focus on in the mentorship, and the benefits of being a mentor

5. Follow-up, follow-up, follow-up until you have received your potential mentor’s response to your request so you can build a mentoring relationship.
set reasonable expectations about mentoring

One of the biggest challenges faced with mentoring is what can an employee reasonably expect from a mentoring relationship. On the low involvement end? On the most desirable end?

My experience includes aligning the amount of involvement required is dependent on the objective(s) of the mentorship. For example, a mentorship focused on career pathing, networking or sponsorship may require a significant time commitment as the plan for the mentorship is developed.

A mentorship devoted to social support or on helping solve specific challenges may take a more case-by-case approach. Mentors and mentees should plan to communicate a minimum of once per month. The guideline may change into 2-3 times a month or every 6 weeks.

The mentor and mentee should also plan to meet individually for a few hours per month. Mentees might choose to follow up on a strategy discussed in the mentoring meetings. Mentors should be brushing up on a particular area of interest, creating learning activities, or coordinating meetings to introduce the mentee to colleagues who can help them in those certain areas.

From the mentee perspective, there can be a known unknown as to what must an employee with a mentor deliver to the mentoring relationship for the relationship to succeed (What does the employee need to give back?). One of the exciting things about mentoring is that the mentors gain as much as the mentees.

conclusion

A mentee who was struggling with her career path had the choice between two very different job openings within her company. She was stuck on which one to choose. I did not hand her the answer, or tell her which one was best.

Instead, I asked the right questions so she could determine the best course herself. I suggested two approaches to help make the best decision. First, to create a Pros/Cons list and evaluate which made the most sense. Second, being a process flow guru, I suggested she implement a decision approach based on a weighted evaluation criteria methodology. She told me my guidance had positive influences as she planned for her future. She was not sure she would have come to the best conclusion without my assistance and she now has a framework for how to make difficult decisions.

Mentoring (as well as being a mentee) has and will continue to be a great experience. My mentor helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses, to plan for the near future and beyond, to know what it will take to get there, and to discuss it with my superiors. I was impressed with my mentor’s guidance. It was a life-changing experience and I gained perspective I could not acquire on my own.

specific benefits

• career development, increased salary, promotions and visibility
• increased confidence
• greater understanding of the organization
• sharpened skills
• expanded networks
• assistance with specific problems

electas

Mentoring creates advantages not just for the mentee and mentor but also for the company the mentor and mentee work. Starting or expanding a corporate mentoring program can do wonders for employee retention, commitment, development and succession planning.