HOW FORMAL SHOULD YOUR MENTORING PROGRAMME BE?

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Getting the right balancing between formality and informality is one of the most difficult aspects of designing an mentoring scheme. It's also one of the most critical, if you want the process to be sustainable.

Not long ago, a petrochemicals company asked us to examine its two pilot, high profile mentoring schemes – why weren't they working? Although launched with great enthusiasm and a considerable effort to train mentors, many of the relationships had simply never taken off. Others had faded away, often because the pair had run out of interesting things to talk about.

The problems stemmed from a variety of failings, not least insufficient clarity about roles and objectives. However, one of the most interesting results of our analysis of data gathered through focus groups was that the relationships that worked best and most often were generally those, where the mentees themselves selected their mentors. Those relationships, where the mentors were effectively imposed by the organisation, were less effective and less likely to be continuing. This distinction was particularly marked among a group of high flyers, who had one mentor of each kind, with the allocated mentor being from the same general area of the business and the personally selected mentor coming from another department.

Yet we know from experiences in other companies that encouraging people to select mentors entirely at their own choice leads in a high proportion of cases to relationships that deliver few, if any, benefits. Left to their own devices, people often choose someone they get on with extremely well and have known for a long time; or they approach a more senior high flyer, with a view to hanging on to their coat-tails. In the first case, while there is high rapport, there is typically very little opportunity for learning – growing pearls of learning requires at least some measure of grit in the oyster. When the chosen mentor is a high flyer, they are often disinterested in helping to develop others; even if they are interested, they are unable to create the necessary time.

It's as a result of this kind of contradiction in experience that emerging best practice in dealing with selection and matching centres around "guided choice". This can mean providing the mentee with strong guidance on how to find and use a mentor; or it can involve giving them a limited number of options, selected by the scheme co-ordinator against criteria, which the mentee has provided or at least been involved in. The second of these approaches requires an existing pool of people, who have volunteered and ideally been trained, to be mentors.

There is, however, an even bigger conflict about mentoring, which is starting to be resolved. Put briefly, while most practitioners – both in-company and consultants – maintain that formal mentoring (i.e. a structured programme in which mentoring relationships are established and supported) is far more effective than informal, most academics, particularly in the United States, say that their studies show the opposite to be true. The clash between scientific observation and the experience of practitioners is not unique to mentoring – it happens in almost every aspect of endeavour – but understanding the reasons for the differences almost always stimulates a leap forward in practical implementation. And that is what is beginning to happen in mentoring right now.

The arguments for formal mentoring

Social inclusion
The main arguments in favour of a formal structure for mentoring centre around the need for some control of a process that, left alone, may not always work to the advantage of the organisation or the majority of the people in it. Social inclusion is an issue of increasing importance in most large organisations – how do we ensure both equal opportunities and the effective use of the diversity of talent, experience and backgrounds of our people? There are many well-documented cases of programmes aimed at a specific group, breaking the glass ceilings in gender, race or disability. The Cabinet Office, for example, runs a highly successful mentoring scheme aimed at people with severe physical (and sometimes mental) disability, who have ambitions to progress. The mentors are all very senior civil servants, who see the relationship as a stimulating challenge.

Another very successful scheme comes from Proctor and Gamble in the United States, which wanted to tackle retention problems among women managers. It's initial idea was to provide senior male executives as mentors, to help the women learn to think and behave in ways that might get them promoted. However, when it was realised that the problem lay less with the women than with the organisation's culture, this was called into question. Surely, to change the culture, it was necessary to change the behaviours and attitudes of the executives first? So the women became mentors to the executives, with remarkably positive results all round. Not only did the women become more visible and learn about higher level decision making, but the executives became sensitised to a whole range of diversity issues – many of which had a direct impact on how the company understood its customers.

Some of the most dramatic figures on mentoring for social inclusion come from the programme, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, which links young people at risk in N. America (and more recently in the UK) with a mentor in the community. The 10-16 year old mentees in this programme are:
- 46% less likely to begin drug abuse (70% for minorities)
- 27% less likely to begin underage drinking
- 30% less likely to hit someone else

They also skip 80% less schooldays than non-mentored peers and have better relationships with parents, peers and teachers.

By contrast, informal mentoring appears to reinforce social exclusion, because the scarce pool of mentors tends to be snapped up by those who are from the dominant social group, who are better educated and more obviously ambitious. In Europe and N. America, that means that white male graduates are far more likely to find an informal mentor than any other group. Because mentor and mentee are so similar, an additional negative is that relatively little learning takes place on the part of the mentor. Diversity in a mentoring relationship stimulates examining issues from different perspectives.

Positive mentoring
Formal mentoring also helps ensure that the relationship has clear purpose. The main reason why so many mentoring relationships fail is that neither mentor nor mentee are quite sure what they are aiming for, so there is no sense of direction. A formal scheme provides an umbrella purpose for the organisation, which helps mentor and mentee establish more specific goals for their own relationship.

Formal mentoring also ensures that there is a practical framework of support for mentor and mentee, including initial training and, in good practice environments, some form of continuing review, where mentors can address any further skills needs they identify. Training ensures both parties understand what is expected of them – not least who manages the relationship and what the boundaries are.

The formal process also helps to weed out "toxic" mentors. People, who have manipulative goals, who represent values the organisation is trying to move away from, or who have so many problems of their own that they end up transferring these to the mentee – these are all

common characters, who can damage both the mentee and the organisation, and who may actively seek to find mentees in an informal environment.

The arguments for informal mentoring

A variety of highly analytical studies, mostly in the United States, suggest that people in informal mentoring relationships are much more satisfied with them. Among the reasons suggested for this are:

- informal relationships take longer to get off the ground and tend to last longer overall, so there is more opportunity to create strong trust and to achieve medium term goals. Formal relationships are often under considerable time pressure.
- informal mentors are less likely to be in the role out of some form of obligation; they are there because they want to be. (There is evidence that altruistic mentors are less effective than those who see benefits for themselves in the relationship.) Many companies with formal schemes put subtle pressure on managers to become mentors as a way to demonstrate their commitment to people development.
- Informal mentors tend to have better communication and coaching skills than formal. (This is a matter of numbers – formal schemes often create increased demand that can only be filled by relaxing the competence criteria. In informal mentoring, the people most likely to put themselves forward – toxic mentors excepted – are those who have confidence in their own competence to perform the role.)

Broadly, these studies suggest that informal mentors offer stronger elements of friendship and empathy than formal mentors. Most of the other differences identified relate to the mentor's willingness to act as a sponsor to the mentee – something seen as a positive in traditional US mentoring, but as a practice to avoid in European, developmental mentoring, which places much more emphasis on helping the mentee become more self-resourceful.

Squaring the circle

Getting the best from a mentoring scheme, then, involves building in the best aspects of both formal and informal approaches. A formal structure is essential, because it provides meaning and direction for relationships and support where necessary. But individual relationships will flourish best when allowed to operate as informally as possible. Successful formal relationships very frequently go on to become successful informal ones.

An organisation, which manages to create a mentoring /coaching culture, can increasingly relax the level of formal intervention it imposes. What structures it does provide, in terms of educational materials and training, for example, become regarded as support mechanisms rather than controls. Meetings between mentors to develop their skills can become informal, self-driven support networks. And the range of people, from whom the mentees learn, can gradually be extended as they learn to build and manage their own learning nets.

How long does it take to get to this point? As yet, we don't know, because no-one has got there yet, to my knowledge. But a number of organisations in Europe have set this as a key goal for their developmental processes. There will undoubtedly be a lot of learning on the way!

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