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DESIGNING AND SUSTAINING A MENTORING PROGRAMME

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Although mentoring is one of the most powerful – possibly *the* most powerful developmental technique – it often fails either at the relationship level or the scheme level. The reasons are several, but divide into three main headings:

- *Contextual* – the organisation is not sufficiently supportive or clear about why mentoring is important
- *Interpersonal* – adverse reactions from third parties, or breakdown of trust and rapport between mentor and mentee
- *Procedural* – being over- or under-managed.

This short article provides a basic framework for designing a sustainable mentoring programme and avoiding the worst of the pitfalls.

Purpose

There is a strong correlation between clarity of purpose for the mentoring scheme and that of the relationship. Equally there is a strong correlation between clarity of purpose and clarity of role expectations between mentor and mentee and the delivery of successful outcomes for both parties. Having a mentoring programme because it is generally a good thing does not encourage top management commitment, nor commitment of the participants.

Research also shows that altruistic mentors (people who perform the role from a vague sense of wanting to put something back) are less effective than those who have clear learning goals of their own from the relationship.

Investment up front is therefore needed to ensure that all participants and influencers understand the nature of the mentoring programme and the benefits – both to the business and to individuals – it is intended to bring. The most effective mentoring programmes almost all have a published statement of purpose and a process for ensuring that mentors and mentees align expectations.

Audiences

The practical reality is that very few companies have sufficient resource of developmentally oriented managers to provide a mentor for everyone simultaneously. So the resource has to be husbanded. Equally, clarity of purpose is more difficult to achieve with a very broad spectrum of people than with a well-selected target audience. Many companies have started programmes for a specific group – often built around diversity objectives – and then widened it as more people become competent and confident in the mentor role.

An essential element in introducing a scheme is to consult and involve the target audience. Many schemes have radically altered in structure and approach as a result of feedback from the intended beneficiaries.

Key processes

The top three processes are selection, matching and training.

Selection of mentees is relatively easy once a target group has been decided, but it is normally important that they take part willingly – commitment to the relationship is an important to success. Selection of mentors depends on a number of factors, including the appropriate gap in experience/ hierarchy, geographical considerations and the specific competencies needed. (A detailed discussion of mentor competencies, with views from many experts, will be published in *The Making of a Mentor*, Butterworth Heinemann, autumn 2003). Seniority in the organisation and ability as a mentor do not necessarily go together.

Matching needs, wherever possible, to involve an element of choice, to ensure commitment on both sides. Good practice seems to be to offer at least two options, for the mentee to choose from and to allow the mentor to say no. All relationships should be probationary for the first two meetings!

Training is essential. Without any training the best we have seen a scheme achieve is 30% of relationships in structured programmes delivering significant value for one or both parties. With training for mentors only, that typically doubles to between 60% and 65%. Training mentors and mentees, and educating other influencers, such as line managers, pushes up the ratio to above 90%. It is important to remember that mentees in European-style, developmental mentoring are expected to play a large part in driving the relationship and helping the mentor help them – so they need to acquire appropriate skills and contextual understanding.

Leadership

Another common characteristic of programmes that deliver the goods is that they have visible support from the top. In some cases, chief executives have spoken openly about how they are mentored, to legitimise mentoring as an important activity.

Resourcing/ continued support

Mentors and mentees require support materials to refer to after their training. They do not need micro-managing – the relationship thrives best on informality from here on. They do, however, need support in the form of opportunities to meet again to share experiences and develop their mentoring skills further. This can form part of the review process. It is also important to have someone who they can refer queries to – a scheme coordinator or a pool of steering group members, who keep an eye on each pair.

Measurement

Measurement and review are essential to help mentors and mentees cement their relationships, to troubleshoot the scheme and to demonstrate that the scheme is delivering results. The critical times to measure are:

- At the beginning, to assess whether mentors' and mentees' expectations are aligned
- After several meetings, to check that the relationship is evolving and that the participants are demonstrating appropriate behaviours
- After 12 months or so, to establish what the benefits are to both parties and the organisation

Readers of *Training Zone* are able to participate for free in a measurement process, which forms part of a large-scale research programme. In return for distributing the questionnaires to mentoring pairs, the organisation receives a benchmark against other organisations at each of the three measurement stages.

Standards for Mentoring Schemes in Employment

Released in 2002 after public consultation and developed by Clutterbuck Associates with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, the Standards for Mentoring Schemes in Employment provide a detailed benchmark for scheme coordinators. Copies can be obtained from the EMCC (www.mentoringcentre.org) or from CA (info@Clutterbuckassociates.co.uk)

Summary

Designing and implementing mentoring schemes that work has become easier as more and more experience of other organisations is made available. However, it does require a considerable upfront investment of time and expertise.

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