

MENTORING REVISITED

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The rapidly evolving organisational environment, together with changes to the nature of work and learning, are creating a context where personal professional development programs are confronted with challenges of limited time and resources. Exacerbating this are new ways of learning - from participating in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) to joining industry related meet-ups with peers. And of course, that's not ignoring the use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook for connecting and sharing with other industry professionals. Meanwhile mentoring, as a professional development strategy, is experiencing a resurgence as an alternative approach by organisations to attract, retain and inspire talent.

As a concept, mentoring is not new - in fact, it could be argued that it is one of the oldest forms of learning. Neither is it new as an organisational learning strategy that needs definition or explanation of process - or does it?

Can you name five great mentors from history? It's likely your answers would include people like: Confucius, the ancient greeks - Aristotle, Plato and Socrates - and perhaps Ghandi for starters.

I conducted a quick office poll asking the team who they considered as a mentor at any stage in their lives or careers. Their responses: a primary school teacher, a grandparent, a music teacher, a sports coach, Oprah Winfrey...

Are you seeing a pattern yet? Many of these people were inspirational and influenced the lives of others. But were they mentors?

Re-visiting the mentoring programs I have designed, delivered and managed the critical factor that produced the most productive outcomes was not an inspirational teacher, it was the

relationship between the mentor and mentee.

Furthermore, a business or organisational career mentor seems to be a distant relative to the people and concepts cited. Yet many successful executives and business leaders credit their achievements to the guidance and advice of a mentor.

Perhaps it is time we revisited our concepts of mentoring and updated our models to reflect changes in the organisational context and how we approach professional development.

What is mentoring anyway?

The definitions of mentoring appear to consistently refer to a number of common elements:

- A relationship between a wiser (typically older), more experienced person as an advisor and a less experienced (younger) person.
- The purpose or outcomes of the relationship that are focused on growth and development for the mentee.
- A focus on development of capability, skill acquisition and career progression.

The underpinning assumption, although rarely explicitly stated as such, is a learning relationship. Which if the common elements in the definition are widely accepted, then we need to review these against the different models or approaches to understand how to reshape our concepts to align with the current workplace context.

Models of mentoring

Traditional

Identifiable by the typical master/apprentice approach and still in practice across a number of professions and

trade or skill-based industries from medical practitioners to plumbers. A relationship where the more experienced or expert practitioner takes the younger, less experienced or novice *under their wing* as a protégé to learn from their instruction and guidance. The relationship is underpinned by an unequal balance of power and assumed knowledge that is intended to replicate the performance of the expert mentor.

Reverse

An intentional tactic to modify the traditional approach to mentoring by recognising the learning relationship as mutually beneficial to both mentee and mentor. The approach has been attributed to Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, where he promoted the acknowledgement that everyone in the organisation had something to contribute. Typically, the model requires a negotiation between mentor and mentee to outline what each will contribute to the learning relationship. For example, the BBC successfully created a program where they paired older, experienced investigative journalists - many of whom were not proficient in the use of social media or digital tools - with younger cadets who did not have the investigative experience but were able to demonstrate the value of social and digital tools.

There is still an element of power relationship in reverse mentoring that is difficult to eliminate - even the age distribution will create an imbalance.

Peer

A newer model is based on a group of peers, perhaps five to six individuals within your organisation, who can share experiences and problem-solving

strategies to achieve goals. This model is not based on the premise that the others know more or are more experienced.

Peer mentoring requires participants to elicit ideas and explore options together in a less intimidating environment with minimal power differences. Many youth programs have been successfully modelled on this approach, yet it is relatively untested as a recognised strategy in organisational contexts.

Some structure for regular meetings and establishing goals will be required to avoid the program becoming a series of conversations with limited evidence of professional development occurring. Less formal meet-ups are the ideal alternative arrangement for conversations with peers and exploring new ideas but a peer mentoring program will require outputs and evaluation if it is to be acknowledged as a valid organisational mentoring program.

Networked

This approach is not necessarily new, but the integration of social technologies in workplaces has enabled an extension to the concept of multiple mentors for individuals to achieve personal goals. A diverse mentoring network acknowledges the extent to which contemporary roles require a mix of skills that are more likely to be facilitated by a range of mentors (or peer connections) across the organisation. The mentoring network also promotes cross-functional connections with other areas of the business increasing awareness of the organisation as a whole and the impact of their contributions.

Hybrid models of mentoring and performance review

Many organisations are tackling the continuous knowledge acquisition and changing environment with a mix of strategies that are seeing performance management and professional development blending into a form of mentoring (yet to be officially labeled) that merges all the approaches above into an ecosystem of engagement

and shared of knowledge against performance criteria.

Effective mentoring relationships

The magic ingredient to a successful mentoring program is a learning relationship that is underpinned by respect. It requires active involvement from both parties to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, and contains a level of vibrance or energy that move beyond a session where one person (typically the mentor) advises the other what to do in a given situation.

Some tips:

- Ensure learning goals and expectations are clarified upfront.
- Make a commitment to ensure reciprocity is established.
- Meet regularly by scheduling three months of meetings - avoid cancelling.
- Agree on an agenda in advance - what feedback is required (by either), what activities or actions are making a difference, what areas need work - these questions can be viewed from both sides of the relationship.
- Regularly evaluate and review progress.
- Be prepared to shift directions to achieve goals.
- Know when a mentoring relationship or program is over. Avoid continuing just for the sake of it. If it's not a time constrained program, then once goals are achieved, it may be time to formally close the mentoring aspect. Ongoing catch-ups with past mentoring colleagues is a frequent benefit of successful relationships.

As learning and development practitioners, more than ever before, we need to be constantly reviewing and challenging our traditional approaches to learning design and delivery. The most effective way to achieve this is through a diverse network of peers. A group of professionals and practitioners, perhaps even outside your industry that enables you to grow and view your practice from alternative perspectives. All the while learning and sharing

new techniques and approaches that provide you with pathways for future opportunities.

The value of participating in a mentoring program may be one of the most profound career decisions you make. Discovering how to make the most of that decision is the next step - find out more about AITD's program that will provide you with an opportunity to develop your future.

References

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