



Mentoring: The “Goldilocks Solution”

So what, you ask, does that cute little blonde fairy tale kid have to do with a corporate activity like mentoring? Her signature tag line had something to do with the temperature of her cereal (c’mon, when was the last time you actually heard someone use the word “porridge?”): “Not too hot, not too cold,--just right.” When it comes to the effectiveness of corporate mentoring, I see a direct analogy.

Mentoring programs need “not too much, not too little,” but just the right amount of both structure and monitoring to produce optimal results. When we break the code on just the right amount of this secret sauce (forgive me another food reference), mentoring can be one of the most effective low cost / high impact development solutions I know; -- perfect for the volatile economic conditions that still plague most of our businesses.

Sadly, in my experience, many organizations have been disappointed at their inability to point to as large a return on their mentoring investments as they had expected. Often this results from a combination of unrealistic expectations along with a failure to provide sufficient structure and monitoring for the process. Here are some things to keep in mind to drive better alignment between expectations and actual outcomes:

- Mentoring is a not a panacea or a “one size fits all” development remedy; in fact it is a better fit for some development goals than for others.
- It is also probably most effective when a part of a larger comprehensive development strategy, rather than standing alone.
- Moreover, mentoring is not merely a series of pleasant conversations, although uninformed mentoring can easily deteriorate to just that. Rather, the most productive mentoring relationships are very much goal and outcome focused.
- Finally, mentoring is in no way a substitute or replacement for the boss relationship. The goal is for the mentoring relationship to supplement the mentee’s relationship with the immediate manager, and ideally to reinforce some of the manager’s messages.

Here are some best practices to guide your efforts:

- Have a clearly defined purpose(s) for mentoring in your organization. Be clear on whether you’re trying to enhance the mentees’ development, work performance, career progression, or assimilation to a new role. Maybe you’re afraid of people bolting once the job market loosens up and are looking to mentoring merely as a retention strategy. Good reasons all, but it’s hard to know how successful your program is unless there is alignment around the purpose. You might even consider separate mentoring initiatives for different purposes across the organization.

- While not always simple to measure, productive mentoring relationships focus on specific goals and outcomes. In addition, the relationships should be time-bound and have a specific beginning and end. At the end of the specified period, both parties should agree on whether to end the relationship, continue it informally, or extend it for another specific period of time in order to complete work on targeted goals.
- The word “mentoring” means different things to different people. It’s no different than if I say the word “breakfast” and I’m thinking dry cereal and you’re picturing Eggs Benedict (I guess I’m hungry today...). The best way to ensure alignment of expectations is to invest in an orientation / training session for all new pairs. That way everyone will leave with the same mental picture of “mentoring.” It is also a good time to allow people to brush up their “power mentoring skills,” such as giving and receiving feedback effectively, listening, and questioning. Finally, where possible, a great way to get the program off to a solid start is to give the pairs the “gift” of some alone time to get to know each other better and schedule their mentoring sessions so that they leave ready to hit the ground running.
- Consider assigning someone to “shepherd” each pair and monitor their progress. The monitoring is exclusively about process, not content. A simple phone call to each party every few weeks can ensure that the pairs are meeting and staying on track. Nothing worse than finding out after the fact that something came up and the pairs stopped meeting. Better to know that real time, so that appropriate adjustments can be made.
- Finally, be sure that you take the time to answer some core questions before you officially launch your mentoring program. In addition to defining the business purpose for the program, consider things like how long the program will last, how people will be nominated and matched with a partner, and your stance on confidentiality between the pairs. Often a key question relative to confidentiality is what happens if the mentee tells the mentor s/he is considering leaving the company? What about a “no-fault divorce” clause? I have seen different companies answer those questions differently, but the point is they should be debated and resolved up front so that everyone knows the rules of the road going in.

A well thought out, appropriately managed mentoring program can provide a rich development experience for both mentor and mentee. Novices beware,--it looks deceptively simple, when in fact it’s just a little bit more complicated than that,--kind of like making a soufflé!