



Mentor Power

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

If you do not have at least one active mentor, you are missing a lot. In my experience, having a strong mentor at work made a huge difference in my career. Even in my ripening old age, I am still gaining benefits from the lessons and ideas planted in me by my mentor when I was younger.

There are obvious benefits of having a mentor in an organization.

1. A mentor helps you learn the ropes faster
2. A mentor coaches you on what to do and especially what to avoid.
3. A mentor is an advocate for you in different circles than yours.
4. A mentor cleans up after you have made a mistake and helps protect your reputation.
5. A mentor pushes you when you need pushing and praises you when you need it.
6. A mentor brings wisdom born of mistakes made in the past so you can avoid them.
7. A mentor operates as a sounding board for ideas and methods.

Many organizations have some form of mentoring program. I support the idea of fostering mentors, but the typical application has a low hit rate long term. That is because the mentor programs in most organizations are procedural rather than organic.

A typical mentor program couples younger professionals with more experienced managers after some sort of computerized matching process. The relationship starts out being helpful for both people, but after a few months it has degraded into a burdensome commitment of time and energy. This aspect is accentuated if there are paperwork requirements or other check-box activities. After about six months, the activities are small remnants of the envisioned program.

The more productive programs seek to educate professionals on the benefits of having a mentor and encourage people to find their own match. This strategy works much better because the chemistry is right from the start, and both parties immediately see

the huge gains being made by both people. It is a mutually-supported organic system rather than an activities-based approach. It is pretty obvious how the protégé benefits in a mentor relationship, but how does the mentor gain from it?

Mentors gain significantly in the following ways:

1. The mentor focuses on helping the protégé, which is personally satisfying.
2. The mentor can gain information from a different level of the organization that may not be readily available by any other means.
3. The mentor helps find information and resources for the protégé, so there is some important learning going on. The best way to learn something is to teach it to someone else.
4. While pushing the protégé forward in the organization, the mentor has the ability to return some favors owed to other managers.
5. The mentor gains a reputation for nurturing people and can thus attract better people over time.
6. The mentor can enhance his or her legacy in the organization by creating an understudy.

Encourage a strong mentoring program in your organization but steer clear of the mechanical match game and the busywork of an overdone process. Let people recognize the benefits and figure out their optimal relationships.

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