

Successful Supervisor Part 52

Successful Mentoring

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Mentoring is one of the most powerful ways organizations can improve. When you see organizations that thrive, you often see a culture that encourages and rewards employees for mentoring others.

Over several decades I have seen numerous “mentoring programs,” and most of them don’t last very long or have much success. I have also seen groups that thrive on mentoring, such that it is sustained and grows with time.

This brief article is about the contrast between those two visible extremes.

Why Mentoring Programs Fail

The core reason mentoring programs fail is imbedded in the word “program.” When we think of a mentoring effort as a mechanical process that brings mentors together with protégés, we get off on the wrong foot. Even with the use of sophisticated computer algorithms, the ability to match people up perfectly has a dismal record of success. Here are some reasons why:

1. Chemistry Missing

Great mentoring relationships grow organically. One person admires another, usually more senior, person and they become friends. They usually do not even use the word “mentor.” It is the quality of the relationship that adds value *in both directions* that keeps the momentum going.

When the match is cooked up by some outside process other than genuine admiration and chemistry, the taproot of stability rarely has a chance to grow.

2. Time Commitment Too Structured and Demanding

If a mechanical process is used, there are often periodic meetings with some form of documentation of what was discussed. In the frenetic pace of business and the chaos in which most executives live, the ability to carve out a specific hour on every Tuesday is unrealistic. The intention may be there, and the meetings may actually happen for a few weeks, but unless the relationship is extremely valuable, the meeting schedule will

start to slip out, and a few months down the road it becomes a rare exception that the “normal” meeting occurs.

Contrast that with a more informal mentoring relationship that has no fixed schedule. The two people meet only when there is a reason and then it is a drop in or call in situation rather than a scheduled commitment.

3. Value Mostly One Way

To endure, the value gained from the relationship needs to be bilateral. The protégé gains specific knowledge and seasoning that is shared, but the mentor also gains from the ability to see the organization from a different vantage point. Being able to experience what is going on through the eyes of another (often younger) person is a huge advantage for busy executives. Managers often become insulated from the actual environment as perceived by the numerous people in the organization.

4. Lack of Trust

All mentor relationships are based on trust. Each individual needs to be sure the information passed back and forth will only go outside the confines of the two individuals if permission is given by the other person. If a violation of the trust is verified or even just suspected, the mentor relationship is in serious jeopardy.

This challenge is particularly acute for the mentor, because information may become known independent of the mentor, yet the protégé may suspect it was leaked. For the mentor, it is important to be keenly alert to changes in body language that might reveal a weakening of the relationship that was not caused by that person.

A Better Way

To gain the most from mentoring, make the concept ubiquitous in the culture. Do not seek to pair certain people up, rather let them select each other via natural processes. Avoid having a documented “Mentoring Program,” but foster an environment that encourages people to pair up as they wish. Let them choose how often and under what circumstances to meet. Let them select the best methods of communication, so the system is not a burden on either party.

For example, I had a great relationship with a boss for over two decades. He liked to communicate mostly using voice mail, so the majority of our discussions were in that mode rather than in scheduled meetings. The asynchronous nature of the communication allowed us to be unfettered, yet very closely connected. He could deal with hundreds of other managers across the organization, yet I was always available.

I recall this person sending a voice mail at about 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning. His comment was, “I always like interfacing with you, Bob, because whenever I pick up the

phone, you are always right there.” He and I never used the word “mentor” to describe the relationship; that really helped make it successful.

For the protégé, the challenge is to be accessible in the right way at the right frequency, yet avoid being a pest. It is a fine line, and body language is the most sensitive way to pick up signals that you are coming on too strong. A mentor would likely never say, “You are taking up too much of my time,” but an astute observer would be able to detect the input through dozens of body language signals.

Make sure you have at least one mentor in your life, and also make sure to guide some other people on their journey. These relationships add significantly to the quality of one’s life and work.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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