

Effective Workplace Mentoring

Traditionally, people often view a professional mentor as someone who has been in their career a long time, assuming longevity equals competence. More and more, though, we're discovering that effective mentors have skills that don't necessarily require several years on the job.

Coaches, supervisors, and co-workers can teach new employees the technical, day-to-day aspects of a job. Mentors, however, should be there to teach and guide new employees about the values, beliefs, norms, and accepted rituals of the organization. Helping new hires understand the organizational culture and determine how they best "fit" in the workplace early on is as important as learning the technical side of the job.

The Learning Organization

A learning organization is best defined as a place that encourages a culture of continuous learning and smart risk-taking. Organizations that offer a safe environment for trying new ideas and embrace failure often see increased innovation and overall job satisfaction among employees. Employees can create and transfer knowledge in such an environment. This knowledge ultimately leads to personal and professional growth for everyone involved. Strong mentors who help to foster this culture are, in turn, assets to a learning organization.

Needs of Adult Learners

The purpose of mentoring adults in the workplace is primarily for retention and enrichment, while youth mentoring typically focuses on personal growth. As such, the process and skills required for adults to mentor other adults are different.

In the context of a learning organization, adults bring with them prior knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, and habits. They also have preferences and expectations for how they learn and grow, both personally and professionally.



Figure 1. Behavior categories of effective mentors of adult learners in the workplace.

Effective mentoring of adults, then, is centered on developing a relationship and establishing trust with the person being mentored. It is also based on a delicate balance between the mentee's independence and interdependence (dependence on others). It is important for mentors to understand the motivations, goals, and preferences of their mentees and adjust their mentoring approach to match.

Tips for Effective Workplace Mentoring

Mentors should consider six categories of behaviors when entering into a mentoring relationship with a mentee: relationship building, information sharing, facilitation, confrontation, modeling, and visioning (Figure 1). Each category is not intended to stand alone, but rather work in conjunction with each other. With the exception of the relationship building behavior, which must happen first and is the foundation for all the others, the timing of the remaining five behavior categories is unique to each mentor-mentee pairing.

Relationship Building

Description: The purpose of relationship building is to establish a climate of trust with your mentee. You can build the relationship through active, empathetic listening. It is also about genuine acceptance of and respect for (but not necessarily agreement with) the mentee's feelings. When

establishing a relationship with your mentee, there should be no judgment.

Recommended Actions

- Practice responsive listening (verbal and nonverbal reactions that signal sincere interest).
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Provide descriptive feedback based on observations, rather than inferences or motives.
- Use perception checks to ensure understanding of feelings.
- Offer nonjudgmental, empathetic responses.

Information Sharing

Description: Information sharing ensures that advice is offered based on accurate and sufficient knowledge of the mentee. Directly request detailed information from mentees, and offer specific suggestions about their current plans and progress. The key here is to establish with the mentee that fact and information are far better than assumption and speculation.

Recommended Actions

- Ask questions aimed at assuring you both understand the facts of the situation.
- Review relevant background information.
- Ask probing questions that require concrete answers.
- Offer directive-type comments about present problems and solutions to consider.
- Make restatements to make sure you understand the facts.
- Rely on facts as an integral component of the decision-making process.

Facilitation

Description: Facilitation is about helping mentees consider alternative views and options while reaching their own decisions about attainable goals. Guide mentees through a reasonably in-depth review and exploration of their interests, abilities, ideas, and beliefs.

Recommended Actions

- Pose hypothetical questions to expand their view.
- Uncover the underlying basis for their assumptions.
- Present multiple viewpoints to generate a more in-depth analysis of decisions and options.
- Examine the seriousness of their commitment to goals.
- Analyze the reasons for their current pursuits.
- Review their recreational and vocational preferences.

Confrontation

Description: While confrontation often has a negative connotation, the purpose in this context is to challenge mentees to think critically about their decisions, actions, and subsequent consequences. This helps mentees recognize unproductive behaviors and evaluate their need and capacity to change. Respectfully challenge mentees' explanations for decisions or avoidance of decisions regarding their development as adult learners.

Note: This is often the most demanding function of a mentor, because it requires both parties to step out of their preferred comfort zones. Additionally, it can kill a mentoring relationship if the mentor does not take the time to establish trust first and determine the mentee's readiness to be challenged.

Recommended Actions

- Use careful probing to assess your mentee's readiness to benefit from different points of view.
- Openly acknowledge concerns about possible negative consequences of constructive (critical) feedback on the relationship.
- Employ a firm (but not combative) verbal stance to promote self-assessment and accountability for apparent discrepancies.
- Focus on strategies and behaviors that are most likely to result in meaningful change.
- Use the least amount of carefully stated feedback necessary for impact.
- Offer comments (before and after) to reinforce your belief in the mentee's potential for growth beyond the current situation.

Modeling

Description: At all times in the mentoring relationship, the mentor should serve as a positive role model for the mentee. In this case, the purpose is to motivate your mentee to take necessary risks, make decisions, and overcome obstacles. Start by sharing relevant life/work experiences and demonstrating support to personalize and enrich the mentoring relationship.

Recommended Actions

- Offer personal thoughts and genuine feelings to emphasize the value of learning from unsuccessful or difficult experiences. (Trial-and-error can lead to self-correction, and failure does not have to limit growth.)

- Select related examples from your own life.
- Express your belief that appropriate risk-taking is necessary for personal, educational, and career development.
- Make statements that clearly encourage actions your mentee can take to attain their stated objectives.

Visioning

Description: As the mentee manages and transitions from interdependence to independence as a professional in the workplace, offer encouragement. Stimulate mentees' critical thinking when envisioning their own future and developing their personal and professional potential.

Recommended Actions

- Make statements to help your mentee reflect on present and future educational and career attainments.
- Ask questions aimed at clarifying your mentee's ability to manage change.

- Review individual choices based on a reasonable assessment of options and resources.
- Make comments directed at analyzing problem-solving and decision-making strategies.
- Express confidence in carefully thought-out decisions.
- Offer remarks that show respect for mentees' capacity to determine their own future.
- Encourage mentee to develop talents and pursue dreams.

Mentoring adults in the workplace can be a successful and fulfilling pursuit, and the benefits to both the individual and the organization are tremendous. Keep in mind that the mentoring relationship represents a general blueprint of an evolving interpersonal relationship. It requires adaptation and modification on the part of both the mentor and the mentee. Finally, it should not be a rigid sequence of events, but rather a continuum of trust and growth.

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