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Mentoring: Worth the Time and Effort?

By **Juanita Luna**

Investing in a mentoring relationship can have a powerful career impact, but is it worth the time and effort? After all, mentoring is time consuming, mentees can resist advice, and even worse, some who consider themselves great mentors do not have a full appreciation of what it takes to be a successful mentor. But if done well, with someone who is both skilled and really cares about being a mentor, the answer is it is absolutely worth the time and effort!

While the primary goal of the relationship is career development of the mentee, mentoring goes beyond simply offering career advice. It is not a one-time or short-term fix. Mentoring is an investment in an ongoing relationship designed to guide, support, and expand an individual's growth.

Mentoring fuels professional goals, engaging regular and periodic "face time," whether virtual or in-person, to delve deeper into the mentee's aspirations. This ongoing dialogue allows the mentor to address specific challenges and opportunities, while adapting to changes in roles and professional environments.

The value for the mentee is in gaining guidance, insights, and encouragement from an experienced leader who they admire as their career progresses. The value for the mentor is in the satisfaction of helping someone else grow, learn, and succeed while further solidifying their leadership skills.

Guidelines for Getting Started

When commencing a mentoring relationship, first establish two critical ground rules:

1. A mentor should never assume the role of a supervisor. Performance evaluations hinder mentoring dialogue. Mentoring sessions are not something done once a quarter over lunch or video with an assigned mentee.
2. The mentor and mentee should have their motivations aligned. They must have a clear understanding of goals and desired outcomes: is the mentee hesitant to take on a new project, considering a different career path, trying to get promoted? It is imperative that the mentor fosters a safe space to brainstorm, identify gaps in skills, and explore potential solutions and paths forward.

Attributes of a Successful Mentor

A great mentor is motivated to cultivate a relationship that empowers the mentee to grow and achieve.

Mentors focus on leveraging strengths with genuine enthusiasm in sharing knowledge and expertise. A mentor who is reluctantly forced into the role as a job responsibility and who lacks this desire to help others almost always does a poor job.

Great mentors celebrate the wins and consider lessons learned when providing constructive feedback and encouragement when setbacks or disappointments occur, creating a safe space along the way. Most people consider feedback a valuable gift, but it needs to be delivered constructively and with care.

Adapting one's style shows respect for the mentee's individuality and sets the stage for a successful and rewarding relationship. Mentoring is never a one-size-fits-all approach. Although mentoring is a collaborative effort, it is incumbent on the mentor to take responsibility for ensuring goal alignment.

Active listening and communicating for understanding are key. Trust and openness will be established in the relationship when the mentee feels listened to and understood. A mentor guides but does not direct.

The mentor should stay alert to external influences which can impact the mentee's trajectory. In today's competitive landscape, a career journey can detour as unanticipated complexities increase. Focus on situational changes including leadership transitions, re-organization, and the creeping impact of workplace politics.

Elements of a Successful Mentoring Program

Mentoring fosters invaluable guidance and support. There are several essential principles to consider that will cultivate an impactful relationship:

1. Mentors should be selected by the mentee, and never assigned.
2. Mentoring is collaborative and requires equal investment between the mentor and mentee. Both should always be well prepared, be open, and commit to follow-through.
3. A great mentor will help the mentee navigate company politics. Whether or not one agrees with certain company initiatives, this is an essential career skill.

4. Relationships that embrace Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging also tend to be successful for the mentee and the mentor and can have a positive impact on company culture. Diversity can be cross generational, ethnic, gender, demographic and other differences or preferences which embody inclusivity.
5. Mentoring relationships developed outside one's department or company can be very valuable. Mentees will benefit from different points of view that offer fresh perspectives.
6. Building and expanding one's network also has far reaching impact. The mentee will be guided to other networks of professional contacts throughout the industry, both internal and external to the company. Mentees should be encouraged to use LinkedIn to connect with potential mentors and expand professional networks.

Importance of Self Awareness

Self-awareness is equally important for both the mentor and mentee. To cultivate self-awareness, the mentor and mentee must embrace open communications and vulnerability. Being open, honest, and direct in discussions is key. This fosters trust and allows for a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives.

It is essential to determine the self-awareness of the mentee. Those who are keenly self-aware own their strengths and weaknesses, seek others' perspectives, and embrace constructive feedback. They are adaptable, accountable and have comfortable, realistic self-confidence. Those who trend low in self-awareness are often defensive, assign blame, challenge feedback, and tend to be inflexible.

Self-awareness is crucial for navigating one's career path effectively. This provides an open and clear path to successful mentoring which will enable tangible results. When individuals are self-aware and are clear on their values, they are better equipped to navigate career goals.

Interestingly, keen self-awareness helps boost one's self-confidence. This leads to comfortable openness in refining one's skill set.

Reverse Mentoring

Consider reverse mentoring, where the relationship is flipped for a specific skill. The mentee with more experience in a selected area guides the more senior employee, often a leader. Reverse mentoring has been around for decades and can be very valuable. Mentors who set aside egos will be welcoming of reverse mentoring and be that much more successful.

Not surprisingly, reverse mentoring often centers around technology, use of social media and other digital platforms including Gen AI. Reverse mentoring can provide the mentor with deep insights into company/department culture from an avenue they may not directly access regularly. Perspectives represented from the "front lines" can be particularly insightful in supplementing the leadership team points of view. Reverse mentoring further fosters trust in the mentor/mentee relationship and enhances leadership skills for the mentee. And it's fun.

Why Do Mentoring Relationships Fail?

Keep in mind factors that can lead to a failed mentoring relationship, including the lack of alignment and understanding of goals. Without clear objectives, the relationship will struggle.

Be sure that the mentee is fully comfortable with and confident in the mentor's approach. It is better to cancel the program and re-direct to help the mentee find the right mentor early on. If one of you does not feel the relationship is a good fit, it will not work and should be terminated.

A mentor who is motivated by money or self-interest, (e.g., “checking a box”) in their leadership track will fail. And remember, the mentor’s primary role is to develop, not supervise. Performance evaluation can hinder progress.

A mentor who embodies these qualities can become a powerful force in the mentee’s life, helping them achieve their full potential. With the investment of time and ownership in a well-structured mentoring partnership, both mentors and mentees will reap significant rewards throughout their careers. Is mentoring worth the time and effort? Absolutely!

About the author



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