The Business Case for Mentoring

By: Melanie S. Griffin

While the term "mentoring" is often used, establishment of meaningful mentoring relationships and programs is a true art form that when effectively implemented, yields significant gains for both the mentoring pair and the firm/company investing in such resources. The following highlights mentoring subtleties that make a critical difference in the success of the relationship, including: how mentorship differs from coaching and sponsorship, formal and organic relationships, reverse mentoring, optimal mentor pairings, effective communication, the benefits of mentoring, and useful mentoring resources.

I. Types of Mentoring Relationships

“Mentoring” is broader than often described and takes many forms beyond traditional, formal, one-on-one pairings.¹ The following is an overview of those relationships, including the differences between coaching, mentoring and sponsorship; formal versus informal pairings; and reverse, or millennial or reciprocal, mentorships.

A. How Mentoring Differs from Other Professional Relationships

Coach. Mentor. Sponsor. Each plays a vital, yet different, role in the development of a professional. Eloquently explained, “[a] coach talks to you, a mentor talks with you, and a sponsor talks about you.” (Emphasis added.)  

Further examining the importance of each relationship, a business coach, like a sports coach, assists with learning a new skill, overcoming a challenge, or improving performance. The pairing is often short-term, focusing on perfection of a specific task that once achieved ends the partnership.

Generally longer-term and more broadly-focused, a mentor enhances a “mentee’s professional performance and development.” Through this relationship, advice, guidance and support boost confidence, allowing the mentee to improve performance, navigate corporate politics, and enjoy increased competence and self-worth.

Transcending a mentor, a sponsor uses personal power and reputation to advocate for another’s advancement achieved, at least in part, as a result of the

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sponsor’s influence. Usually a leader with the ability to control the behavior of others, a sponsor generally differs from a mentor in the following ways:

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<tr>
<th>Mentors</th>
<th>Sponsors</th>
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<td>Can sit at any level in the hierarchy</td>
<td>Must be senior managers with influence</td>
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<td>Provide emotional support, feedback on how to improve, and other advice</td>
<td>Make sure their people are considered for promising opportunities and challenging assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help mentees learn to navigate corporate politics</td>
<td>Give protegés exposure to other executives who may help their careers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on mentees’ personal and professional development</td>
<td>Protect their protegés from negative publicity or damaging contact with senior executives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serve as role models</td>
<td>Fight to get their people promoted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strive to increase mentees’ sense of competence and self-worth</td>
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Given the inspiration mentoring infuses into a career that can blossom into a sponsorship, the often unexplained nuances of the art of mentoring are next explored.

B. **Formal v. Organic Mentoring Relationships & the Role of Differing Personality Types**

When envisioning mentoring, a formal program facilitated by a business or organization often comes to mind. Such programs are usually structured, founded to accomplish a specific business objective, and measured to determine if such goal is met. Pairs are often strategically matched to meet the business objective and last for a designated length of time, generally nine to twelve months.

Informal mentoring relationships, on the other hand, are usually based on chemistry between the mentor and mentee and arise naturally when the two meet,

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7 Id.

8 Id.


recognize their commonalties, and agree to enter into a mentorship together. While, as discussed below, the pair can establish the criteria of their relationship to maximize its effectiveness, such matches often have unspecified goals and unknown outcomes.\textsuperscript{11} They also often last longer, sometimes evolving into a friendship.\textsuperscript{12} The two types of mentoring relationships are well-summarized in the following chart:\textsuperscript{13}

Many report heightened enjoyment from informal mentorships due to the genuine human connection between the mentor and mentee.\textsuperscript{14} To wit, the benefits received by

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  \item[\textsuperscript{11}] Id.
  \item[\textsuperscript{12}] Id.
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protégés in formal programs typically fall short of the benefits bestowed upon mentees “involved in naturally occurring, informal mentoring relationships” as a result of the social attraction that “may be absent in formally assigned mentoring pairings.”

Formal programs excel, though, in creating meaningful mentoring opportunities for introverted individuals who are less likely to attempt to initiate a mentoring relationship than their socially-skilled peers. Such programs are thus important for noticing and appropriately preparing high potential introverts for advanced leadership positions.

As shown, wonderful benefits are associated with both formal and informal mentoring. Organizational leadership thus must facilitate the mentorships best suited for the business while taking into account the personality types of its key talent to be developed.

C. Reverse Mentoring, or Millennial or Reciprocal Mentorships

Equally as powerful as a traditional mentoring pair where a more seasoned executive mentors a younger professional is a match through which a younger colleague mentors an older peer, often referred to as reverse, millennial or reciprocal mentoring. Millennial mentors are often particularly adept at teaching their senior counterparts about technology, the Web, computers, social media, and current business

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16 Id.

trends, including catering to new markets, development of fresh products and services, and organizational and social change.\textsuperscript{18}

First popularized more than a decade ago by GE Chairman Jack Welsh, reverse mentoring benefits include: closure of the knowledge gap for both parties, such as business terminology and best industry practices for the younger employee and online marketing for the senior counter-part; empowerment and development of both emerging and established leaders; and a cohesive cross-generation workforce.\textsuperscript{19} Given technology’s revolution of the workplace, millennials provide a fresh perspective critical to the success of the organization.\textsuperscript{20} Simply, when the boss is willing to learn new techniques from the organization’s freshest members, office relationships are improved and strengthened.

\textit{II. Optimal Mentorship Pairing: Find the Spark! & Focus on Goals}

Organizations facilitating formal mentoring programs frequently attempt to match mentees with mentors with any number of identical traits, including gender, ethnicity, profession, marital and familial status, interpersonal skills, and leadership styles. Many times, however, such matches fail, as too many criteria complicate pairing and


oftentimes, create categorically-ideal matches that lack a human connection. The best practice is thus to make achievement of the mentee’s goals, the point of the relationship, the focus of the pairing, while also considering if a “spark” exists between the mentee and mentor.

Indeed, a good mentor is a trusted advisor who provides sound advice. Such person may be older or younger, and in the mentee’s chosen profession or not. This is especially true for beginner and intermediate-level mentees. Although their inquiries are uniquely phrased, distilled, they constitute a core set of questions that can be answered by a myriad of professionals, in their field or not, such as guidance on interview preparation, salary negotiation, business development, networking, work-life balance, avoidance of professional mistakes, and career best practices. Answering such questions requires general business knowledge from a successful, productive professional, not an overly complicated matching process.

Moreover, a mentor with traits different from the mentee’s may broaden the mentee’s depth through alternative perspectives and skillsets, best helping the mentee

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grow and advance.\textsuperscript{26} For example, a mentor of the opposite gender may most effectively foster the development of the mentee’s weaknesses in a way that a mentor of the same sex cannot.

Based on the forgoing, the most successful mentoring programs will consider replacing lengthy mentor applications with recruitment of knowledgeable, compassionate, enthusiastic mentors, who take mentoring seriously, are committed to lifelong-learning and invest in the gratification and success of the mentee, and have the talent and expertise to best cultivate and nurture the mentee.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{III. Effective Mentoring Communications: The Critical First Meeting}

It is commonplace at the end of a formal mentoring program to hear that although the pair was initially excited to work together, they failed to meaningfully connect during their relationship. Such failure is often the result of an ineffective initial meeting.\textsuperscript{28}

To facilitate a successful mentoring relationship, at the outset, the mentor and mentee must be prepared to agree upon their roadmap. Discussion topics may include: who will initiate conversation – the mentor or the mentee; preferred method(s) of communication – in-person, email, phone conference, Skype/GoToMeeting/etc., or social media; expected response period – within 24 hours, the week, etc.; whether your


communications are confidential; frequency of interaction – weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.; length of the relationship if not established, and if it is, whether such relationship may be extended; critical dates – for example, known periods of unavailability or a key project deadline for which guidance is sought; discussion topics; taboo inquiries, such as regarding personal life; anticipated connections; contemplated activities; desired programs and events to attend; and ideal goal achievement. Consider using the following prompts during the initial strategy session:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Items</th>
<th>Strategies for Conversation</th>
<th>Possible Mentor Approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take time getting to know each other.</td>
<td>Obtain a copy of the mentee’s bio in advance. If one is not available, create one through conversation.</td>
<td>Establish rapport. Exchange information. Identify points of connection.</td>
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<td>Talk about mentoring.</td>
<td>Ask: Have you ever been engaged in a mentoring relationship? If so, what did you learn from that experience?</td>
<td>Talk about your own mentoring experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determine the mentee’s goals.</td>
<td>Ask: What do you want to learn from this experience? Give the mentee an opportunity to articulate broad goals.</td>
<td>Determine if the mentee is clear about his or her goals and objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine the mentee’s relationship needs and expectations.</td>
<td>Ask: What do you want out of this relationship?</td>
<td>Be sure you are clear about what your mentee wants from the mentoring relationship.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Define the deliverables and a time table.</td>
<td>Ask: What would success look like for you? What is your timetable for achieving it?</td>
<td>Do you have an area of expertise that is relevant to the mentee’s learning goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share your assumptions, needs, expectations and limitations with candor and</td>
<td>Ask for feedback. Discuss: Implications for</td>
<td>What are you willing and capable of contributing to the relationship?</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>confidentiality.</th>
<th>the relationship.</th>
<th>Discuss the implications of each other’s styles and how that might affect the mentoring relationship.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss options and opportunities for learning.</td>
<td>Ask: How would you like to go about achieving your learning goals?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discuss: Learning and communication styles.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ask: What is the most useful kind of assistance I can provide?</td>
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As intimated by the forgoing chart, initially, a mentorship is not a contemplated friendship or job opportunity. To keep the relationship focused on the mentor’s guidance, the mentor may ask the mentee to provide proposed meeting agendas. In addition to setting the meeting tone, the pre-meeting agenda review affords the mentor time to plan the offered advice. Similarly, an organization facilitating a formal mentoring program may periodically provide its pairings with suggested conversation questions to foster regular communication and ensure the discussion of desired topics.

Above all, honesty of both the mentor and the mentee is crucial to a successful mentoring relationship. As a mentor, the provision of straightforward, candid

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advice is most beneficial to the mentee. Part of the first meeting may thus include preparing the mentee to hear what is needed, not what is wanted, during the relationship. Additionally, if upon understanding the mentee’s mentorship goals the mentor cannot provide the desired guidance, the mentor should inform the mentee of the mismatched skillsets and connect the mentee with a better-aligned mentor, if possible. Similarly, to grow, the mentee must solicit and accept critical feedback and inform the mentor of the true mentorship objectives. Regarding the latter, for example, a mentor cannot best assist a mentee with obtaining a job in another city if the mentor believes the mentee wants to advance at the mentee’s current company.

In sum, meaningful mentoring relationships are not accidental. Rather, establishment of a vibrant mentorship requires education of the mentor and mentee regarding their respective roles and a strong commitment to a mutually agreeable plan of action.

IV. The Power of Mentoring & Benefits to the Business

The reported benefits of business mentoring are impressive and include increased productivity, diversity, morale and retention, personal growth, access to organizational resources and rewards, improved technical skills, increased cross-

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generation collaboration, and a heightened awareness of company culture, policies and expectations, all of which positively increase the bottom line. More specifically:

- The productivity of managers who are mentored increases by 88%;
- 35% of employees without regular mentoring seek another job within twelve months;
- 95% of mentoring participants say that mentorship motivates them to do their very best; and
- Mentored workers annually earn $5K - $22K more than their non-mentored counter-parts.

Indeed, “[m]entoring has long been recognized as a tool in career development,” with evidence that “mentored individuals often earn higher performance evaluations, higher salaries, and faster career progress than non-mentored individuals,” creating higher job satisfaction and commitment.

This is particularly true for women, minorities and seniors, who experience increased self-confidence, improved communication skills, and truer self-assessments as a result of mentorships. Programs targeting such employees have the ability to transform a company’s culture, creating diverse management teams more reflective of

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workforces and markets. Such transformation of a company’s leadership composition is often critical to its bottom line, as clients and vendors are demanding a diverse labor force. It is thus no longer simply politically correct and morally right to provide mentorship to women, minorities and seniors; rather, it is oftentimes a necessity for a company to remain financially viable.

Given the forgoing significant mentorship benefits, the question should shift from whether to host a mentoring program to how soon to establish one to best nurture your business and its employees.

V. Mentoring Program Resources

Many resources exist to assist with the establishment or improvement of a mentoring program. For example, organizations devoted to the practice of mentoring such as the National Mentoring Resource Center and the National Mentoring Partnership offer a plethora of resources including guides, handouts, training resources, management resources, program policies and procedures, and recruitment and marketing tools. Likewise, research is readily available regarding top corporate mentoring programs proven successful within companies such as Sodexo, Time Warner

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43 Id.


Cable and Caterpillar.\textsuperscript{46} The critical questions asked by such companies when forming and evaluating their mentoring programs are also on the Web.\textsuperscript{47} With the accessibility of such vibrant materials, a company need not reinvent the wheel, and instead, can enjoy the synergies from the tried and true mentorships that already exist that can serve as the foundation for a new, or improved, mentoring program.

\textit{VI. Summary: Effective Mentoring Requires Planning, Education & Facilitation}

As shown above, successful mentoring relationships are not accidental. The most effective pairings are intentionally established partnerships, executed through an agreed upon and thought out plan, by mentors and mentees aware of and educated regarding their respective roles, committed to regular communication and interaction. Thus, to establish or improve your program or pairing, thoughtfully create, implement and execute the roadmap that optimizes mentorship functionality, results and enjoyment.
