Structured Mentoring

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Does formal mentoring really work?

As mentoring gains in popularity organizations need to carefully consider this powerful tool for developing employees. The traditional models of mentoring however have failed to keep up with trends in business. Mentoring is now, in particular, a strategic business initiative and organizations are more than ever expecting to see a "return on relationship". It is for this reason that organisations have "institutionalised" and formalized mentoring. Relationships are expected to extract greater value-add for their growth and development! We should first of all recognize

That "institutionalised mentoring" really grew from observing the unquestionable benefits that resulted from mentoring relationships -that were the result of a natural affinity between two people.

Questions however keep on emerging from this "structured/formal" mentoring landscape as initiatives and so called mentoring relationships often fall short of not only organizational expectations, but even that of the mentor and mentee.

- Should mentoring be thought of as a central strategy involving people development rather than a mere tool for a selected few in the business?
- Must mentoring be part of good management practices and is it a role that managers should be expected to fulfill?
- What does it take to be a successful mentor and how should a faculty of competent mentors be identified?
- How do we prepare mentors for this challenge?
- How do we encourage ordinary business relationships to show potential to turn into profitable mentoring relationships?
- How do we measure the success of such an initiative

So what are the challenges of a structured/formal approach? 7 key questions will highlight the concerns that organizations and those that implement formal mentoring, grapple with.

1. Why are we doing this?

This becomes the most important question to answer before any attempt at institutionalizing mentoring. For some organizations, mentoring is about ensuring competitiveness, sustainability and growth by fast tracking high potential employees for definite positions. Others employ mentoring as a vehicle to develop and retain a leadership pipeline for critical positions within their business. Some proactively invest in graduate development to ensure not only a more demographic reflection of society, but to develop a bench of talented young individuals as their business expands and grows.

A concerning trend is that organisations are willing to chase numbers in mentoring at the expense of profitable relationships. Most organizations pursue the value of mentoring, without in my view, clearly defining what it is that they would like to achieve! This not only makes it difficult to measure the true impact, but relationships (mentors/mentees) are expected to "make it work" without the necessary structure or end in mind!

2. Who should be the mentors?

Finding the right mentors is possibly the greatest challenge for organizations that are pursuing a structured mentoring programme. Implementers of mentoring programmes will testify that they have tried just about everything to engage the heart and minds of subject matter experts, line managers and operational staff to fulfill a mentoring role. Imagine an organization where nothing happens without support from the top, where a "project code" is necessary to engage employee's energy and time, where employee's timesheets and KPA's become the means by which they are rewarded –and people development is not one of those! The most successful mentoring relationships developed seamlessly without any form of "coercion", manipulation or incentive!

In Jack Welch's words. "You can't force managers to love and care for people. It must come from the heart! Mentors have a different "gene"" he describes this gene as "a love to see people grow, they get a kick out of seeing people being promoted, they celebrate their people, and have a generosity of spirit" they are not afraid to have strong people around them and have an abundance mentality when it comes to sharing knowledge, experience and lessons from life".

Insightful mentors understand that, when they invest in their protégés, they help shape the future and contribute to the sustainability of their organisation.

Reality is… without a pool of competent and willing mentors any mentoring initiative is doomed to fail.

3. How should we match mentors and mentees?

Many seasoned mentors believe that a structured approach is "artificial" and based on a formal agreement. The two parties do not come together as a result of a relationship that has grown organically into that of mentor – mentee. Such a structured relationship is often a result of a relationship thrown together arbitrarily, even when there has been an attempt at match - making.

Talking about the match, a mentor should have a natural affinity for the mentee. This is critical to the success of the relationship and that it unfortunately cannot be accurately predicted nor authentically manufactured in a matching process. More often than not both mentors and mentees find their meetings awkward and even stressful as a result of this 'forced' intimacy. Predictably, involvement tends to peter out and the so called mentoring relationship is degraded to nothing more than a "now and then coffee session".

4. Does the success of formal mentoring depend on the mentee?

Mentoring should also be embraced as a vehicle for personal development by those benefiting from it. Mentees should exhibit particular qualities and demonstrate "character" in order to maximize a relationship that could potentially make a significant impact in and on their lives and careers. Yet, for mentoring to be "profitable", the relationship needs to be characterized by common ground, high levels of trust and openness that is reciprocal over time. A "profitable" mentoring relationship differentiates itself from other working relationships in its level of intimacy since it deals with a number of crucial conversations and fairly sensitive topics, like managing relationships, social graces, negotiating the

company's political landscape and personal growth and feedback. The above is in my view the responsibility of both the mentor and mentee.

The question remains, "does a formal mentoring programme/relationship create expectations that dampens the eagerness and hunger of the mentee? All those "natural" relationships have evolved because of both parties seeing something in the other and then seamlessly pursuing the value of that which lies at the heart of the relationship. Be it professional supervision, career advice, networking opportunities or greater business exposure.

5. How much structure is necessary?

To preserve a formal mentoring relationship it may be necessary to provide templates, guidelines and review meeting support. My corporate endeavors highlighted the challenge of this dichotomy. The structure that is provided to assist relationship A becomes the reason why it dampens the spontaneity in

relationship B. This will not only differ from relationship to relationship but also from organization to organization. The outcomes of the programme must dictate and the unique culture of the business should guide how much structure would be sufficient without overloading the relationship.

6. How do you sustain formal mentoring relationships?

The reality is that formal mentoring relationships need support to help protract the relationship but more so to ensure that the benefits of the mentoring relationship are met. This is the true challenge as organizations are only willing to invest in such an initiative if there is a "return on relationship". This in itself is a

challenge but more so when the culture in the organisation contradicts the value of people development. It is when operational efficiencies, business excellence, profit margins and bottom line results take priority to/over everything else, that mentoring relationships suffer most!

7. How do we measure the success of mentoring?

It is simple, the value of a structured mentoring programme lies in the fact that it is more measurable than those that naturally evolve over time. Hence the reason that organizations are willing to invest in such an initiative. Some relationships have a strong "time to competence" outcome where mentees are assessed against specific performance results in their field of expertise.

A final thought on measurement.

Organisations need to have the maturity to measure the true impact of mentoring long after the formal relationship has "expired". It is only then that the tangible benefits of "profitable relationships" have matured. Yes, the veritable value of mentoring lies beyond the time frame of a specific mentoring relationship and it is evident in successful mentees performance, their level of accountability and their leadership influence. The "return on relationship" lies in the projects that they manage, the business they generate, the revenue stream they secure even the complexity of a project they manage. Can all of this be attributed only to mentoring? Probably not, but most of these mentees will bear witness to the mentors in their lives and the contribution and mark that these extraordinary people have left!

Thoughts to consider /in summary…

Clearly, structured mentoring relationships are exposed to a number of individual, interpersonal, and organizational challenges. These factors loom large in any mentoring relationship and it is for this reason that I believe that it is important to highlight these realities during mentor and mentee training. It is furthermore critical to build the capacity of both mentors and mentees to maximize and leverage learning within a structured mentoring environment.

Others are linked to accelerated learning, where leadership assessments, employee satisfaction surveys even operational performance of the business are key measures. There are countless other measures, staff retention, promotions, complexity of projects and assignments, readiness on succession planning grids. All of these measures should be derived from the initial **"Why are we doing this?"**

Despite these challenges, I have witnessed scores of structured mentoring relationships that have presented phenomenal growth results. Mentees will testify that they have been products of such mentoring relationships and here is the true value… the best way to reward a mentor is to become one for others. It is when formal relationships work that it contributes to a culture where people informally pursue the value of mentoring as a development tool. Mentors publicly proclaim the importance of mentoring and the benefits they themselves gained from such relationships. Thus, they encourage others to experience the pleasure in seeing mentees develop, grow and ultimately succeed (whether formally or informally, whether short or long term, or whether as a result of a single action or an agreed-upon development plan).

The success of a structured mentoring relationship (like any other) depends on both parties' commitment to meeting the challenges of the relationship and to take full advantage of the opportunities that are presented- all of this with a clear end in mind for the relationship!

Remember Mentors never stop mentoring – that is the difference between success and significance. In John Maxwell's words,
"Significance is when I add value to others ... I think mentoring is significance..."

As much as mentors leave something behind, they help shape a better future for us all! Mentoring relationships, in a much broader context, create sustainability for the future of families, communities and our country.