Mentoring in the workplace: A give-and-take for success

Mentoring, or the "process of an integrated approach to advising, coaching, and nurturing, focused on creating a viable relationship to enhance individual career/personal/professional growth and development" (Young, 2001), is becoming a popular tool for both attracting and retaining talented employees in the public and private sectors. This concept dates back to Greek mythology: In *The Odyssey*, Homer describes a mentor/protégé relationship where the mentor acts as a physical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and administrative guide to Odysseus's son Telemachus. The protégé, or mentee, then went on to fight in the Trojan Wars.

Employers have adopted this mythological idea of mentoring, realizing that a mentee can go on to accomplish great things in an organization. As Anthony Blue writes in the March 2002 issue of *Information Outlook*, "Mentoring is used as an invaluable tool for developing a personal investment and is a cost-effective way for delivering outcomes and achieving organizational growth" (Blue, 2002).

Mentoring can be considered a win-win-win situation: It benefits the employer, the mentee, and it benefits the mentor. Companies can use a mentoring program to attract the best employees, and these programs create a sense of loyalty in workers that helps the company retain them. Mentoring programs increase employee retention by 20 to 30 percent. Considering it can cost $150,000 to recruit and train just one employee, it makes economic sense for an employer to implement a mentoring program—which can also create a sense of community within an organization.

Employees who are mentored benefit from the experiences and advice of their mentor, and gain skills that can help them reach their highest potential. The knowledge an employee receives from a mentor can have a major influence on future career success, as evidenced by the fact that 75% of executives credit mentoring as a key role in their career.

While the benefits for a mentor may not seem obvious, mentors do report satisfaction in taking protégés under their wing. Mentors enjoy the knowledge that they helped shape the mentee's career. Mentors also gain management and leadership skills that can help advance their own careers.

While an employer is solely responsible for implementing and overseeing a mentoring program, making a mentor/mentee relationship work is not the unilateral duty of the mentor. Both the mentor and the mentee must have the desire and dedication to make the relationship a success. Good mentors should possess certain qualities including: enthusiasm toward their jobs and the company; listening and motivational skills; interpersonal and communication skills; and the ability to offer positive feedback and constructive criticism to their mentee.

To ensure that the mentoring relationship works, the mentee needs to understand that the mentor/mentee arrangement is a two-way street. Mentees must take the initiative in their own learning. A good mentee will be upfront about his or her aspirations and goals, as well as strengths and weaknesses—making it easier for the mentor to help.

Mentees should also accept that the nature of the mentoring relationship means that they are not equal to their mentor. In a successful mentor/protégé relationship, there is no room for professional jealousy or an unwillingness to receive constructive criticism. And discretion should always be present when a mentor entrusts a protégé with personal information.

Considering the vast benefits a mentoring program can offer employers and employees, it is important for a company to implement a program that works. In "Organizational Mentoring," Blue offers tips to help employers launch a successful mentoring program, including: (1) establishing a plan of action or formula for the mentor and mentee to follow; (2) creating guidelines and objectives that are specific to the mentor/mentee relationship; and (3) developing an evaluation system for the mentor program to measure feedback.

References:

Bauer, Tayla N. Perceived mentoring fairness: relationships with gender, mentoring type, mentoring experience, and mentoring needs. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, February 1999.

Blue, Anthony. Organizational mentoring. *Information Outlook*, March 2002.

Miranda, Christine W. Training and retaining high-caliber employees: A successful mentoring program. *Florida Water Resources Journal*, May 2002.

Young, Clara Y. Mentoring: The Components for Success. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, September 2001.

[Sidebar]

Legal concerns that may hinder mentoring

Although the benefits of mentoring have been proven, some legal issues may undermine even the most carefully planned and implemented program. In “Mirror-Image Mentoring,” Jonathan A. Segal outlines some concerns that can prevent a mentoring program from functioning as it should:

- *Sexual harassment.* Good mentors become emotionally invested in the success of their mentees, making it impossible for the mentor/mentee relationship to remain strictly professional. Because most executives are men, it is more likely that a man, rather than a woman, would be assigned to mentor a new female employee. A mentoring program requires mentors to pay a lot of personal attention to their protégés, but this may be misinterpreted by a female mentee as sexual attraction. As a result, many male mentors may avoid taking on a female protégée in order to protect themselves from sexual harassment claims.
- *Discrimination issues.* While employment laws, like Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, are designed to promote diversity in the workplace, the fact remains that the majority of executives are white males. A major component of a successful mentor/mentee relationship is the ability of both parties to be open and honest about their concerns on the job. However, fear of discrimination lawsuits may prevent a white male mentor from discussing issues of race, religion, and the like.

To avoid sexual harassment and discrimination lawsuits, mentors may engage in what Segal calls “mirror-image mentoring,” where they will only work with protégés who come from the same background that they do. This practice is based on the fallacy that two employees who share the same traits also share the same values and goals. If mentors practice this, it would mean that in most cases white men would only mentor other white men. But with the current diversity in the labor market, it is in a company’s best interest to promote more diversity at the top, and the key to this is mentoring a more diverse group of employees.

References:

Segal, Johnathan A. Mirror-Image Mentoring. *HR Magazine*, March 2000.