

Creating a Company-Wide Mentoring Program

By Ken Ewan

I believe mentoring is essential to leadership development and can significantly accelerate the trajectory of one's career. Unfortunately, many mentoring programs fail, stall, or never get off the ground because they lack a clear understanding of what they're trying to achieve, leaving both the company and participants unable to identify, measure, and benefit from the results.

Recently, I had an opportunity to speak with a Washington, D.C., architecture firm to help kick-off their new mentoring program. The company seemed to have the mechanics of a mentoring initiative well in hand, so I focused the theme of my talk on the long-term benefits of such a program—challenging both the participants and company to work toward a clear understanding of what they wanted to get out of it in the first place.

Whether you're starting a mentoring program from scratch or looking to bring new energy to an existing program, following these four steps will help ensure your company—and your employees—are getting the results they deserve.

Step 1: Identify the Status Quo

I began my D.C. presentation with the same two questions I begin most career development discussions:

- How important is your career development to you?
- How much time and attention are you giving to actually working on career development?

In most cases, the answers revealed a disconnect. My intent in posing this challenge was twofold: to establish an "as is" perspective on the individual's or company's commitment to career development, and to create a dissatisfaction with the status quo. I believe if you want more in your career, you must become more. Both the participants and company should view a mentoring program as a strategic investment in a new "could be" condition.

Step 2: Establish Goals

To get started, it is necessary to ask a few fundamental questions of all involved.

For the Company

Any good training, development, or mentoring program should advance the business in some way. Consider how you want the company to be different as a result of implementing a mentoring program. This is a chance to turn knowledge into productivity, increase profitability, and minimize duplicity and conflict. At the same time, this creates a nurturing training ground and learning environment for future leaders in the process. If you pair mentors strategically with high-potential employees, mentoring also becomes a two-way street. It allows the new millennial workforce to share their enthusiasm and drive for accomplishment with current leaders and senior staff.

For Participants

As an individual participant, can you identify what is missing today? Do you wish for better performance, increased



capacity to handle your workload, or improved behaviors to accelerate your advancement to larger and more complex projects or roles? For the mentee and mentor, how do you want to be different as a result of your participation?

Step 3: Set a Plan for Results

Most of my clients work in the A/E/C industries. They are well-versed in project planning, yet most would initiate a mentoring program without a plan. As with any good project, your mentoring program should have milestones, project reviews, productivity measures, and performance objectives. Benchmark current company metrics around key performance indicators before your mentoring program begins. Monitoring around these metrics regularly will clue you in on whether you are reaping the full financial and cultural benefits of the program.

A successful mentoring program can be the backbone of a culture change that can positively impact turnover, retention, recruiting, and absenteeism. Your window into the program's daily dynamics is



important so both the organizing committee and company leadership can work together to fine-tune the program and make adjustments along the way. I suggest quarterly mentor- and mentee-only roundtable discussions focused on what is working and what may need changing. Facilitated properly, these feedback loops can enhance company dynamics, build relationships, improve teamwork, and formulate an improved culture.

Step 4: Address Obstacles

A “good enough” program is just not good enough. What good does it do you to understand your goals if you can’t also realistically confront the obstacles that could keep you from achieving them? I am a follower of Alan Fine’s Performance Formula program. It portends that:

Performance = Capacity - Interference

I use this formula to facilitate sessions with participants to examine their current climate for implementing a program like mentoring. Individuals are challenged to identify three each of personal, departmental, and organizational issues that could keep them from engaging effectively with the new initiative. With the group’s support, they can then

sort the issues, prioritize them, and create a strategy to minimize their impact on the program. This is an opportunity to be realistic about the stated goals and be proactive about eliminating barriers to success.

Implementing a mentoring program is an investment—of individual time and effort from participants, and of real company funds for the time required to support the program. Like any investment, one should consider the long-term benefits over short-term results. Clarity of investment objectives, measures of progress, and understanding how the program advances both the individual’s personal growth and the company’s business are paramount to success.

For all A/E/C organizations looking to implement or improve a mentoring program, my advice is to treat it like you would any other project. Know why you are doing it, have a plan, create measures to monitor progress, and be clear about the results you expect. ■