

Mentor capitalists

Mentoring often yields more dividends than training – for both manager and employee



Charlie Mernagh Associate Director BTS

Of all the forms of training, possibly the most effective is mentoring. Just ask Odysseus, who placed the original Mentor in charge of his young son Telemachus while he went overseas to fight in the Trojan War. Perhaps it is the one-to-one element. Perhaps it is the targeted training from a seasoned professional. Or perhaps it is the safety net that a mentor offers, the sort of "bigger brother" role that allows for a level of confidence in the mentee, a level of confidence which would be impossible to achieve simply by passing on information through traditional training. Of course, mentors do not exist simply in a training capacity – in many cases, they will be managers, bosses, people in authority. But the difference between a traditional manager and a mentor could be the difference between the development of an employee within a company and that same employee becoming disillusioned and eventually leaving.

"A manager sets objectives; a mentor agrees goals," explained Charlie Mernagh, associate director with Business Training Solutions. "A manager identifies performance problems, while a mentor identifies development opportunities. Managers achieve task results now, mentors aim to get the job done better in the future. Managers are concerned with standards and dead-

lines, and monitor for control. Mentors are concerned with career development and needs, and monitor for progress. In short, a manager grabs opportunities; a mentor creates opportunities."

According to Mernagh, mentoring can be broken down into a series of phases, each of which has its own purpose and range of activities. One such phase is evaluation, where a significant part of the role is to help identify the current strengths and weaknesses of the person being mentored in order to agree training (short term) and development (long term) needs. Another phase is stimulation, where the mentor encourages and motivates the person to develop themselves.

A third phase is about facilitation. This is where the mentee needs the mentor's status and/or experience to help them to access learning and development opportunities, resources, access to the right people and so on.

"As an effective manager you will also want to monitor the effectiveness of the activities undertaken and to keep an eye on progress," said Mernagh. "The process of mentoring has, at its core, learning and development. This will come about primarily through 'experiential learning'. Development can take place in a wide variety of very different situations, some at work and some outside of work. Some of these are predictable – you will know what they are; but others need to be created."

Of course, there are many elements of coaching inherent in being an effective mentor, and the differences between coaching and instruction can be summed up in a neat phrase: "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand".

There will be times when to



instruct is the best way, such as when there is only one way of doing something, or where there is a technique, skill or procedure to learn. And it has to be stated that repetitive copying is a good way of embedding skills/learning. But coaching is a more inclusive process, which encourages the learner to ask questions and take the lead, while facilitating people encourages them to take ownership of a situation, thereby involving people and helping them to understand situations more deeply.

As a mentor, it is useful to understand at least some of the principles of coaching – otherwise you may end up being more of a manager/friend than a useful manager/mentor.

"Coaching, as a process, tends to confirm and underpin the following cultural messages," said Mernagh. "The manager and staff work together. The manager leads through questioning, guiding and helping, rather than telling and demonstrating. The manager is centrally involved in the development of their staff (as opposed to

'we leave it to the training department'). And the employee is at the centre of both the learning and the achievement, and is more empowered to take responsibility and credit for their abilities and their learning."

The benefits to the company of this sort of approach are easily quantifiable. Firstly, real work is being carried out at the same time as learning is taking place, and there is no need for the learner to be taken 'off production'. The learning can be arranged at a time and place convenient to the learner and their manager, and the manager is directly involved in the learning process. And, for the manager/mentor, he or she develops key coaching skills, which are generally helpful in both interpersonal and professional relations.

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