

Mentoring: An Essential Leadership Skill

Mentoring from a Mentor's Perspective – do you have what it takes to be a Mentor?

Building a high-performing team is a key part of being an effective leader. And this includes helping individuals within your team learn, grow, and become more effective in their jobs - which is why mentoring is such an important leadership skill.

But what does mentoring involve? What do you need to consider before setting up mentoring relationships? In this article, we will highlight what a mentor does and doesn't do, and we'll help you decide how far mentoring is right for you and your team.

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a relationship between two people with the goal of professional and personal development. The "mentor" is usually an experienced individual who shares knowledge, experience and advice with a less experienced person, or "mentee."

Mentors become trusted advisers and role models – people who have "been there" and "done that." They support and encourage their mentees by offering suggestions and knowledge, both general and specific. The goal is to help mentees improve their skills and, hopefully, advance their careers.

What are the Benefits of Mentoring?

Mentoring can be rewarding for you, both personally and professionally. It can help you build a stronger and more successful team, as well as improve your leadership and communication skills, learn new perspectives and ways of thinking, and gain a strong sense of personal satisfaction.

For potential mentees, the benefits of mentoring can be huge. They get focused coaching and training from a skilled, knowledgeable and experienced individual, and they also get assistance and advice in navigating the many tricky situations that can arise in the workplace. This can help them work more effectively, overcome obstacles and break through blockages that would otherwise slow or stall their careers.

Even if you understand the benefits of mentoring and it sounds like a great idea, you need to decide whether this sort of time-consuming, in-depth relationship is right for you and for the person you're thinking of mentoring. If the mentoring relationship has arisen informally and spontaneously, then the chances are that things are fine. However, if you're taking a more formal approach to mentoring, it's worth exploring your reasons for mentoring and asking yourself whether you want to take this type of commitment further. To do so, ask yourself these questions:

- Is mentoring the best way of developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes the potential mentee needs? Or would other approaches be quicker or more effective?

- How will mentoring contribute toward your own career goals, and to the goals of your team and your organisation?
- Is mentoring a particular individual a good use of your time? Are you comfortable that you'll be able to devote time to him or her on a regular basis?
- Do you have knowledge, skills and experience that the mentee is likely to find helpful?
- How much personal satisfaction are you likely to get from the relationship? Does this justify your involvement? And do you like the individual enough to want to invest time in mentoring him or her on a regular basis?
- In what areas are you willing to help? Are there any areas that you don't want to go near?

What You Should Consider

Although you may want to jump right in with both feet, make sure that you also think about these practical considerations:

- **Formality of approach** – Do you want to take a relaxed, ad hoc approach to mentoring, or do you want to approach sessions in a more structured, formal way?
- **Frequency of contact** – How much time can you commit to this relationship?
 - Can you meet (however you do that) weekly? Bi-weekly? Once a month?
 - How long can you spend in each meeting? Half an hour? An hour? More?
 - Do you want to be available between "formal" sessions?
- **Method of contact** – Would you prefer face-to-face meetings, phone calls, or emails?
- **Duration of partnership** – Do you want to limit the length of the mentoring partnership? Do you want to set regular intervals to review whether you're both happy with the relationship, or do you just want to informally review progress on an ongoing basis?
- **Confidentiality** – How will you approach confidential business information? Think of ways to speak about general concepts and situations while maintaining confidentiality.

Where to Draw the Line

When developing a mentoring relationship, make sure you have clear boundaries of what you can and cannot do for the mentee. Answer the above questions to help yourself define the boundaries for the relationship. Then, when you're meeting, you'll better understand your own mindset – what areas you're interested in covering, and what you will and will not do.

Take the lead on where you'll allow the mentoring relationship to go and what ground you'll cover. As a general guide, focus on your expertise and experience. If anything is beyond your skills and abilities, refer the mentee to another expert. For example, if a discussion about human resources issues raises a concern about employment law, consider sending your mentee to an internal expert or someone else you know that has the relevant level of experience. If conversations about work problems lead into personal or family problems, the mentee may need more focused professional help from a psychologist or therapist.

As a mentor, you can become the mentee's confidante and adviser. You may be called upon to be a "sounding board" for all sorts of issues and concerns. So know in advance how you're going to deal with difficult situations.

Key Points

By mentoring effectively, you can do a lot to improve the performance of key individuals within your team, thereby helping yourself reach team and organisational goals. Mentoring

can also give you a great overall sense of personal satisfaction, knowing that you're helping someone else learn and grow on a professional and personal level.

Before you begin a mentoring partnership, it's useful to think about your reasons for becoming a mentor and the practical considerations and logistics of such a relationship. If you decide that mentoring is right for you, the time and effort that you put into it can reap great rewards that far exceed your expectations.

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