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Throughout a lifetime, people come into contact with countless others, each point marking an opportunity to leave an impression. The mark of a person is their legacy. It shouldn’t necessarily be what they accomplish, but rather the people they inspire to follow their example. Careers are no different. Over the average career, thousands of people will make contact. Occasionally, bonds occur and allow a more focused and collaborative learning atmosphere to develop. That is the essence of mentoring.
Focus on Relationships, Not Processes

Many people feel that mentoring is most critical in the opening years of a career, but that isn’t always the case. Granted, the opening years of anyone’s professional days require a lot of training and development, which can best be handled by more senior members in the field. The belief is that once a certain point is reached, the need for formal mentoring falls away and people are more self-sufficient. That isn’t always the case, and, in fact, is rarely the case.

Mentoring relationships are most useful when they are bidirectional. The mentor and mentee should each benefit from the situation. Ideally, it should be a situation where each is learning from the other. The relationship needs to be open, and honest. And, similar to any serious relationship, it takes a significant amount of work and dedication to make it truly fruitful.

Fostering Relationships
Organizations seek to foster mentoring relationships by establishing formal mentoring programs. Rarely are there success stories surrounding those programs. More often you hear about them feeling forced or mandatory, being ineffective, or otherwise a burden to employees. Oftentimes, these programs include mentor assignments and scripted interactions. People cite the structure and mandatory nature of these programs as hindering the ability to make them personal and free flowing.

Employers recognize the need for mentoring within their organizations. Such relationships set the tone of the office culture, develop future leaders, and assist in transition planning. Ignoring the potential is unappealing. However, developing a formal mentoring program is dangerous. Best case, an organization will establish all of the positives and not develop any of the negative sentiments previously mentioned. Worst case, it alienates staff and results in people distancing themselves from the program and the thought of establishing an important relationship with a colleague.

Now that sufficient time has been spent knocking down the concept of traditional mentoring programs, the question becomes, what type of program would work? To answer that question requires some thought about under which circumstances the most effective mentoring takes place and the types of individuals who are most interested in establishing those relationships.

Traditionally speaking, those seeking mentoring are typically recent graduates to approximately 10 years of professional experience. They are interested in professional development and willing to put in the time and effort to devote themselves to improving their skill set and career advancement.

In contrast, the traditional mentor is someone who perceives that they have been successful and is looking to impart that experience and wisdom to those just beginning in their career. The mentors are often motivated by the recollection of someone who encouraged their professional development or simply identifying with a person in whom they see similarities with themselves.

The interesting spin on this is that the people seeking mentors aren’t always looking for the same characteristics. Young professionals are looking for mentors with demonstrated successes or skills. They are seeking people with strong reputations who have made recognized contributions to the organization or the field.

Establishing Connections
Establishing the connections between prospective mentors and mentees can be problematic. Very often the connections develop through organic means: individuals working on the same teams or projects, having similar technical backgrounds, or even working the same schedule. As previously discussed, having a system that assigns people to each other rarely works. The goal becomes establishing a mechanism to draw people together in a way that isn’t obtrusive or forced, but somehow encourages those connections to be made.

Experience has shown that there are a number of different scenarios in which those connections can begin to form.
Company Social Events
In addition to boosting morale and providing a needed break from office life, social events give people an opportunity to bond in ways which normal office interactions don’t allow. Involving people in sporting events, off-site meetings, or other activities is a great way to learn more about them as individuals.

Giving people an opportunity to develop connections based on a broader view of their professional team is beneficial. Through those types of interactions, it is possible to put people in situations where they can let more of their personalities through. Such openness is a quick way to expose people to possibilities that may not have seemed relevant before. There is nothing wrong with mentors and mentees being in different departments or functional areas within an organization. In fact, there are those who believe that such relationships actually foster more value for the organization by allowing the cross pollination of ideas and philosophies.

Brown Bag Meetings
Informal professional training environments, often called “brown bags,” provide opportunities for shared learning. Typically, such events are focused on new knowledge, things that are just beginning to develop, or presentations of case studies. The most advantageous component of a brown bag is the interactive portion where people share their experiences or ask pointed questions.

The free exchange of ideas opens eyes and can create bonds through common philosophies and experiences. The active discussion will efficiently open doors and help lay the foundation for future connections.

Business Resource Groups
Over the past few years, business resource groups, or BRGs, have become quite popular in larger organizations. BRGs are structured around groups that are common by definition. The groups could be based on career discipline, tenure, ethnicity, or any other characteristic. It is important to understand that while these groups may feel exclusionary based on the definition given, the groups are actually intently focused on the growth of their members through the promotion of sharing, networking, and development. For many BRGs, that involves creating programming for broader audiences in an effort to accomplish those goals.

While this may not be a viable concept in small organizations, it presents a powerful tool that can be applied in larger enterprises to help them feel smaller, and foster connections. BRGs are typically devoted to their chartering principals and follow the guidance of a senior executive. The tight integration of the groups with the corporate structure provides an inherent degree of support and validates their missions and events. For the mentors, the involvement of people with unique viewpoints will often open new perspectives, which can be informative and thought provoking resulting in productivity.

Any time people are brought together based on a common thread, the potential for the forging of meaningful relationships increases. In a BRG, where people not only already have something in common,
but are also actively seeking professional advancement, there is usually a high degree of motivation to seek the guidance that comes with a mentoring relationship.

Professional Organizations
Membership and active participation in professional organizations is a gateway to a strong relationship, which can evolve into a more traditional mentorship. By opening doors to others outside someone’s current employer, the possibilities for growth and professional development expand immensely. Without the burden of internal politics and potentially prying eyes, there is a natural opportunity for relationships to develop and evolve in a more organic manner.

On the downside, this does present concerns for some employers as these types of relationships can result in employee turnover based on the relationships that develop.

Mentor-mentee relationships are critical to professional development. Academic education is critical to establish a foundation, but typically it is a mentor that brings the academic knowledge into practical application. Recognizing that mentor relationships may be fleeting or long term, most likely develop organically in a less structured environment, and are often best fostered by simply giving them room and resources to exist, will produce better results. By developing formalized mentoring programs and imposing guidance and a set formula to be followed, it is likely that the program itself is going to be detrimental and have negative results.

The Value of Mentoring
If mentoring is recognized as being a value to your organization, consider formally acknowledging the relationships and providing resources to allow them to flourish. But otherwise try not to interfere or script the process. Often in organic relationships, the mentor will learn as much from the mentee as they are imparting. The end result is a more engaged workforce, deeper employee connections, and a boost in employee morale. It will be easier to attract top talent as the nurturing of employees and cultivation of skills will draw the most highly motivated and qualified individuals seeking to further their careers.

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