Business Perspectives on Managing World-Class Training

Training Industry QUARTERLY

A Training Industry, Inc. Ezine

Summer 2010

[TACTICS]

MENTORING MISTAKES: 10 PROGRAM PITFALLS & HOW TO AVOID THEM

BY BETH N. CARVIN

The corporate landscape is littered with mentoring programs that have died on the vine. Management fails to rally behind the project. Mentors decline to sign on or don't know how to proceed if they do. Ill-matched mentor-mentee relationships evaporate. Program administration becomes overwhelming. Yet all of these problems are avoidable.

If a mentoring initiative fails to take root, it is usually because the HR and training managers responsible for launching and managing the program have never been taught to properly plant and cultivate the seeds. Success or failure can hinge on knowing the likely trouble spots and planning ahead to sidestep them.

Given years of evidence that mentoring can yield important benefits ranging from fostering employee retention to grooming the next generation of managers, you don't want to doom your program by poor planning. Here are some common mistakes that sabotage mentoring efforts, along with strategies to avoid becoming a casualty.

1 Failing to build your business case.

You are unlikely to get executive buy-in for a mentoring program unless you are able to show the potential to the company and its bottom line. A little research will pay off. Ernst & Young's mentoring program for women, for example, saved $10 million annually (primarily in turnover costs) and increased the percentage of women partners from 5 percent to 13 percent. A Minnesota hospital that implemented mentoring for newly hired nursing assistants saw turnover plummet from 64 percent to 4 percent in two years. Examples like these can help convince management to back a mentoring project.

2 Missing an executive champion.

Sometimes the fate of a mentoring program is sealed by the presence or absence of an executive champion. The right advocate not only helps you secure the financial resources and management support to run the campaign, but also serves as a kind of Pied Piper in convincing mentors to participate. The best candidate for the position is a senior leader with a strong mentor in his or her past. These people are usually eager to "pay it forward" by promoting mentoring to others in the organization.

3 Not having clear objectives.

Your mentoring objectives will shape the way the program is structured and therefore your ability to produce results. Is your goal to acclimate new hires? Build cross-departmental connections? Blend corporate cultures after a recent acquisition? Support diversity initiatives? Nurture high-potential employees to become your future leaders? The answer will help determine whether mentorships are self-matched or administrator-matched (see #5), formal or informal, goal- or non-goal based, and so on.

4 Poorly executing mentor recruitment.

Willing mentors rarely materialize out of thin air. You need a two-part recruiting plan. First, decide how you're going to recruit. Will senior executives nominate mentors? Will each department be responsible for providing names? Will you ask for volunteers in management meetings or through corporate communications channels?

Second, be ready to "sell" prospective mentors by providing information on how they can benefit. Executive champions can make a big contribution to the cause. So can resources like "The Ten Best Reasons to Be a Mentor" or materials you develop yourself to wave the mentoring flag.

MENTORSHIPS ARE MORE SUCCESSFUL WHEN THE PROTÉGÉ IS INVOLVED IN SELECTING HIS OR HER CORPORATE COACH.

5 Using the wrong matching methodology.

Developing your strategy for pairing mentors and mentees involves answering two key questions. First, will you match manually or use technology to do the work? Second, will the participants choose their partners (self-matching) or will a mentoring team handle the task (administrator matching)?

Manual matching can work for programs with fewer than 50 mentorships, but it gets too unwieldy and time-consuming for larger programs. The process can take hours or weeks. Automated mentor-mentee matching products shorten the timeline by allowing mentors and mentees to complete online profiles outlining their background, interests and goals. Participants or program managers can then search for matches by specific criteria, zeroing in on compatible twosomes with a click.

The self-matching versus administrator-matching choice is not as clear-cut. While executives clearly need input into initiatives designed to develop high-potential employees, for example, failing to give mentees a voice can backfire. Research has proven that mentorships are more successful when the protégé is involved in selecting his or her corporate coach. One solution is to ask for the mentee's top three mentor choices and try to pick from that pool, making it a collaborative decision rather than a forced assignment.

Resources

- **How to Start a Corporate Mentoring Program** by Beth N. Carvin
- **Is Mentoring Worth the Money: A Benefit-Cost Analysis and 5-year Rate of Return** by A. Villar and M. Strong, University of California, Santa Cruz
- **The Mentor News.** Published by Peer Resources. E-Newsletter with information about emerging trends, critical issues, and essential resources to persons involved as leaders and participants in all forms of mentoring.
- **Catalyst Inc.** A nonprofit organization working globally to build inclusive workplaces and expand opportunities for women and business, with a strong research and knowledge base on mentoring.

6 Neglecting to establish and enforce rules.

Even the least formal mentoring programs need a few rules. If you are using a self-matching process enabling mentees to request mentors, for example, one rule might be that mentors must respond to the request within two weeks. If mentees are signing up for your program voluntarily rather than being handpicked, you might decide that they must select a potential mentor within two months or be disqualified.

Other rules might address issues such as length of mentorship and required number of mentor-mentee meetings. You don't need to write a book, but you should provide basic guidelines and expectations.

7 Leaving participants without a roadmap.

Frequently mentorships get stalled at the starting gate because participants don't know how to get where they're going. You should be providing materials you've prepared (activity suggestions, goal-setting forms, tips), online resources (links to relevant information) and hands-on support (training sessions, webinars) to jump-start the relationship. Refrain from overloading your mentors and their protégés with reading material and meetings, but help them by lighting the fuse. They will take it from there.

8 Letting the energy fizzle.

Many programs lose momentum because they lose visibility. You need to use e-mail, newsletters and other communication channels to sustain the buzz. Tell mentorship success stories from your organization. Survey participants and report the results. Share new mentoring research or interesting items you encounter in your reading. Ask participants to refer colleagues to the program if there is open enrollment. And always include a plug for your program.

MANY PROGRAMS LOSE MOMENTUM BECAUSE THEY LOSE VISIBILITY.

9 Neglecting to crunch the numbers.

Tracking and measuring your program progress is critical. You should be monitoring the proportion of mentors to mentees, the demographic composition of each group, the number of mentorships formed as well as dissolved, mentees' needs versus mentors' strengths, and much more. This will not only provide feedback to your executive champion and corporate management, but it guides you in refining your program.

If the majority of your mentees want assistance with strategic planning and only a few of your mentors have that skill, for example, you will know where to focus future mentor recruiting efforts. Over the long term, you can even compare retention and promotion of program participants to other employees to determine your return on investment.

10 Failing to automate where possible.

Manual program administration can become too burdensome, particularly with larger mentorship numbers. We have already talked about leveraging technology to provide self-service mentor-mentee matching, dramatically reducing the time required to pair people with common goals and interests. The same products typically also track program progress, generate reports, provide space to house program documents, and send surveys or broadcast e-mail to participants—usually through an online interface. You'll spend less time managing your program—and more watching it thrive.

Beth N. Carvin is the CEO and President of Nobscot Corporation, a global technology firm specializing in key areas of employee retention and development. Nobscot's MentorScout division is located at http://www.mentorscout.com. *Email Beth at* editor@trainingindustry.com.

Takeaways

- Find an internal champion to help promote the mentoring program.
- Provide a roadmap for mentors and mentees to follow.
- Keep the energy level high by sharing success stories.
- Monitor and provide results to your executive champion.
- Utilize mentoring technology to ease matching and administration as your program grows.