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GROUP MENTORING: Keys to Success

Is the increasingly popular
strategy of group mentoring
right for your organization?

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Imagine if Greek goddess Athena, mentor to Telemachus, had invited her protégé to the top of Mount Olympus for a group mentoring session with the 12 Olympians. Not only would he have had guidance from the goddess of wisdom herself, but also the collective knowledge and connections of Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Apollo, and the others.

Group mentoring in a corporate setting may not have the same help from on high, but it is becoming an increasingly popular strategy for augmenting the traditional learning and development opportunities of one-to-one mentoring.

In many cases, the embrace of group mentoring is more a matter of practicality than a deliberate shift or expansion in mentoring

policy. Companies find themselves with a limited pool of mentors and not enough time, resources, or senior leadership support to recruit the mentors necessary to have an appropriate mentor for each mentee. Group mentoring provides the opportunity to spread the available mentors across a larger number of protégés, thereby maximizing each mentor's reach.

But there are benefits to mentees as well. According to academic research, group mentoring provides a safe venue for mentees who are uncomfortable meeting one-on-one with a more senior leader. It eliminates problems relating to "personal chemistry" (or lack thereof). It allows for multiple viewpoints and cross-disciplinary examination of issues and ideas, and it creates additional learning opportunities through group projects and activities.

It may never replace one-on-one mentoring, but it can be an important adjunct to it.

Group framework

Like senior-mentor-to junior-mentee relationships, group mentoring requires a framework with rules and expectations to be successful. It should follow a certain structure and methodology:

- 1 | Groups should meet formally through regularly scheduled in-person meetings or informally through online group mentoring or collaboration platforms. The chosen methodology may be dictated by the geographic distance between group members, the company culture, or the demographic composition of the mentors and mentees.
- 2 | Group facilitators should be used to achieve maximum benefits. The facilitator's role ranges from introducing the group, moderating introductions, encouraging participation, and clarifying expectations to posing questions to elicit mentees' development needs, helping the group create learning objectives, keeping mentors on track, encouraging group activities and discussions, and keeping the group moving in a positive direction. A good facilitator will slowly fade into the background once the group is successfully under way.
- 3 | In-person groups should include one to three mentors, five to 15 mentees, and one or two facilitators. Online mentoring groups can have an unlimited number of mentors and mentees plus one or more group facilitators.
- 4 | Groups should be set up around a particular topic, learning objective, or common challenge. It may be career development, work-life balance, diversity, innovation, or any number of other issues.
- 5 | Each group member should have a specific learning and development need that is shared with the group. Individual and goals should be set.
- 6 | In-person mentoring groups should have a defined beginning and end. Members



of the group should work individually and as a team with the mentor(s) on their learning objectives. The last few meetings can be used for presentations and a closing celebration.

- 7] Online mentoring groups can have a beginning and end, or the group itself can continue indefinitely with membership changing throughout the life of the mentoring program.

Technology support

One of the ways to support this process is to use online mentoring platforms or other collaborative technology to expedite group formation, provide a central point of communication, and enable easy monitoring by program administrators.

Newer mentoring support programs, for example, offer features such as self-service setup of mentoring groups by employees or program administrators as well as tags and other tools enabling users to quickly locate groups of interest. Once a group is formed, some of these programs offer a separate workspace for each mentoring group with areas to post group projects, event notices, resources, and questions that can be answered by group mentors or fellow members. It's an efficient way to help groups coalesce, communicate, and stay on course.

Obstacles to overcome

The obvious challenge in using group mentoring for learning and talent development relates to the personality and behavior characteristics of individual participants. The "mouse" may need help with coming out of the corner to fully engage in the mentoring experience. Conversely, the "loud mouth" may need to be quieted to allow everyone to participate equally in the group. Facilitators can help in both cases.

The less obvious challenge involves group dynamics. If this isn't managed, it can get in the way of an otherwise successful mentoring group. Bruce Tuckman's 1965 stages of group development—forming, storming, norming, and performing—aptly defined the problem. Tuckman's analysis again illustrates why facilitators are critical in bringing focus and leadership into a group mentoring environment.

During the forming stage, according to Tuckman, members have a high degree of dependence on the leader(s) for guidance and direction. Group members are focused on meeting each other and learning about the group's goals and objectives. Once group members settle in, however, they may move into the difficult storming period where cliques form, leaders are tested, and

power struggles ensue. Strong facilitator leadership is needed at this time to enforce rules and keep the group focused on goals.

The norming stage occurs when agreement is reached. Responsibilities are clear. Participants learn to appreciate each other's skills and experience regardless of any previous struggles. Mentors and mentees listen and support each other. They are able to disagree without conflict. The group becomes cohesive and effective. This leads to the performing stage, when the group has a shared vision and is ready to dedicate energy to the tasks required to meet those shared goals and objectives.

Understanding these dynamics can help facilitators and program administrators compress the timeframe required to reach the performing stage and ensure that group mentoring delivers on its promise.

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Done right, group mentoring can provide profound and long-lasting effects for both the participants and the organization. A comprehensive 2002 analysis of a women's group mentoring program at a university in Australia documented important outcomes including

- **Increased confidence**
- **sharpened skills**
- **expanded understanding of the organization**
- **expanded networking opportunities that extend beyond the life of the program**
- **perfected solutions to specific problems and challenges**
- **Increased commitment and connectedness to the organization.**

Clearly, offering a group mentoring option as an addition to the traditional one-to-one mentoring scenario represents a promising opportunity for employee skill enhancement, career development, and knowledge transfer. With proper planning and guidance, organizations can implement a successful group mentoring program that will nurture participants, benefit the enterprise as a whole, and address the realities of limited mentor pools and constrained resources. Back on Mount Olympus, Athena and her fellow deities would be proud.