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The Hows and Whys of Group Mentoring

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper seeks to examine the methodologies for developing a group mentoring component as an add-on to an existing or new corporate mentoring program.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper defines group mentoring and explains the differences between group mentoring and classroom training. It provides the hallmarks of mentoring that should exist in a group mentoring program along with the individual development areas that can be successfully addressed through group mentoring. Also included are seven tips for starting and sustaining a group mentoring program. These tips cover areas such as the optimal group structure, logistics, the use of facilitators, obstacles and measuring the success of the program.*

Findings – *When implemented correctly, mentoring groups have proven to be a successful training and development strategy. Some of the documented outcomes for participants are increased confidence, expanded understanding of the organization and increased commitment and connectedness to the organization.*

Originality/value – *Training and development managers who are struggling to expand their mentoring programs can use the information provided in the paper to add group mentoring to their mentorship program.*

Keywords *Group work, Mentoring, Corporate strategy, Employee development, Training*

Paper type *General review*

Victoria Jones has created a successful mentoring program for her organization. Employee turnover is down, time to productivity is up, and commitment to the organization is at an all-time high for mentoring program participants. Victoria's executive VP is so pleased with the results that she has requested an expanded program to give all employees the opportunity to connect with an experienced

mentor. Victoria has just one problem. She is already tapped out with the present level of mentoring. How is she going to find enough mentors for all the mentees?

Victoria in this fictional example is not alone. Enthusiasm for mentoring is growing exponentially. In the USA, roughly 70 percent of Fortune 500 companies have one or more mentoring programs. In the UK, 80 percent of senior executives in a recent survey credit having a mentor as one of the keys to their success.

The upshot is that traditionally small mentoring programs – focused on a particular objective such as high potential development, diversity initiatives and new hire acclimation – are fueling demand for organization-wide mentoring. However, meeting the demand with traditional one-on-one mentoring is next to impossible.

While new mentoring technologies have helped reduce the administrative burdens of managing large mentoring programs, training and development managers are still faced with the challenge of limited mentor pools. One practical and effective alternative is to spread limited numbers of mentors across many mentees by utilizing a group mentoring strategy. That is one of the reasons why group mentoring has been growing steadily over the past five years.

Group mentoring defined

What exactly is group mentoring and how does it differ from classroom training?

Group mentoring is a methodology for individual development that utilizes multiple experts (mentors) and multiple learners (mentees) in a group setting. Although structured as a group, learning is individual and each mentee works on his or her own unique learning needs and development goals.

On the surface, group mentoring looks similar to classroom training. Yet on closer examination, group mentoring has much more in common with its one-to-one mentoring brethren.

In classroom training, trainers deliver a specific set of pre-defined material. The trainer's job is to impart knowledge, provide practice for trainees, and test that the material has been properly retained and understood. Each student walks away with the same set of knowledge. In a corporate setting, this is important for learning work tasks, rules and methods.

Mentoring groups function very differently. In order for a learning group to be defined as a mentoring group, it should include many of the hallmarks of one-to-one mentoring. For example:

- Each mentee has his or her own unique learning objectives.
- The relationship that forms between mentors and mentees goes beyond that of

- teacher-student.
- The group is a safe and confidential environment for both mentees and mentors to explore and share personal challenges.
 - Mentors guide rather than train.
 - The topics dealt with generally fall outside the realm of classroom training.
 - Both mentors and mentees benefit from participating in group mentoring.

Mentoring groups may explore career development, provide psycho-social support, help build networks and facilitate knowledge transfer.

Mentors guide mentees by sharing experiences, asking Socratic-type questions, participating in shared activities, allowing mentees to job shadow, and introducing mentees to others in the organization that can help further their goals.

Benefits to mentees

In addition to enabling organizations to expand their mentoring programs by spreading a limited number of available mentors across a larger number of mentees, group mentoring offers benefits to mentees beyond those available in the traditional one-to-one mentoring scenario.

According to researchers, 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. It creates additional learning opportunities through group projects and activities.

Creating a successful program

Since group mentoring is very different from the one-on-one model, different tactics must be applied to start and sustain a program. Here are some basic guidelines for establishing and running mentoring groups:

1. *Start by planning your group structure.* How many participants will you have in each group? Will you have more than one mentor per group? Most mentoring groups have between one to three mentors and five to 15 mentees. An appropriate-sized group will be large enough to allow for a variety of viewpoints and experiences and small enough so that all members may participate fully.
2. *Work out the logistics.* Where will the group(s) meet? How often will they meet? Will the group meet in-person or be a strictly virtual online mentoring group? In-person groups build strong bonds and allow more options for group activities. Online groups allow participants from different geographic regions and cultures to

participate and share their perspectives.

3. *Identify and appoint facilitators.* Facilitators are an important component of both in-person and online mentoring groups. Facilitation is used to help the mentoring groups get off to a good start and to stay focused during the early stages of the mentoring. At the beginning, the facilitator's role involves introducing the group, moderating introductions, encouraging participation and clarifying expectations. As the group begins to develop, the facilitator may pose questions to elicit mentees' development needs, help the group create learning objectives, keep mentors on track, encourage group activities and discussions, and keep the group moving in a positive direction. Once the group is successfully underway, the facilitator should slowly fade into the background.

4. *Watch for individual participant issues that might derail the mentoring group.* Common obstacles revolve around individual personality types. The know-it-all participant might seek to monopolize the group. The wallflower may hold back and not participate at all. A mentor may show a lack of commitment to the group by perpetually showing up late or missing meetings completely.

5. *Understand group dynamics to accelerate results.* Mentoring groups follow the Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing pattern of group development first identified by Princeton University's Bruce Tuckman in 1965. 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. During this phase, 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 on 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.

6. *Use technology to expand the benefits of group mentoring.* While small in-person groups can be very effective for mentoring, you can extend the reach using mentoring technology or other collaboration platforms. Mentoring technology allows you 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 is an efficient way to help groups coalesce, communicate and stay on course.

7. Establish start and stop dates. Similar to one-to-one mentoring, mentoring groups should have a precise beginning and a known ending. While the relationships formed during the group mentoring period may last a lifetime, the group itself must have a defined endpoint.

The exception to this rule is for online mentoring groups where participants may come and go throughout the life of the group.

8. Measure the results of your program. Research has revealed that 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;
- networking opportunities that expanded beyond the life of the program;
- solutions to specific problems and challenges; and
- increased commitment and connectedness to the organization.

Measure the success of your program through quantitative and qualitative surveys, analysis of goals set and achieved, and longitudinal review of participants' future success with the organization. Success may be measured by comparing performance ratings, promotions and retention rates of program participants versus those who did not participate in the mentoring.

Conclusion

While mentoring between one mentor and one mentee will always have value and will never disappear, mentoring groups can be a successful add-on that solves the problem of an insufficient pool of mentors, addresses different learning styles and preferences of mentees, and most importantly helps meet the growing demand for mentoring opportunities in today's corporate environment.

For training and development managers like the fictitious Victoria Jones, group mentoring eliminates the need to worry about mustering up enough mentors for an expanded mentoring program. Adding a group component stretches resources, provides an additional learning and development mentoring option for employees,

and ultimately strengthens the organization in the same way as traditional senior-mentor-junior-mentee programs: by skill building, talent development, knowledge transfer and related benefits that help ensure business continuity and performance in the future.

About the author

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