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Mentoring works

Written by David Hosmer on 1 April 2015 in Feature

Feature **David Hosmer** provides evidence of the success of mentoring at MIT



What do the following two references to mentoring have in common?

- Mentor “a friend of Odysseus entrusted with the education of Odysseus’s son Telemachus.”¹
- “No more training do you require. Already know you, that which you need.” Yoda² Neither of these popular references is grounded in reality.

While it has its place in Greek mythology and *Star Wars* fiction, why should we take the idea of mentoring seriously during business realities that command bottom line results? What evidence proves the value of mentoring that deserves the time spent on this article? Mentoring relationships afford win-win outcomes. Perhaps you will be convinced too. Here is why.

Does mentoring work?

Mentoring affords benefits for mentors, mentees and organisations, including:

- Reduces turnover
- Improves employee engagement and performance
- Affords opportunities that would not otherwise be available to minorities and women
- Serves as a succession planning strategy
- Results in higher career satisfaction
- Increases likelihood of promotions and increased salaries Promotes sharing of business knowledge and skills
- Develops successful leaders.

A Catalyst study conducted for Nationwide Insurance captures the impact of mentoring, particularly for those from black and minority ethnic communities. “This study tells us that formal mentoring programs can reduce turnover, enhance a company’s recruitment efforts, increase the overall performance of a company and create an overall improved work environment, especially for women and people of color,” said Candice Barnhardt, vice president, Nationwide Insurance.”³

Despite its acclaimed benefits, how do you know if your organisation is ready, or even if mentoring truly does work? A pilot is one option for developing proof of concept and introducing mentoring as a viable management development strategy. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA we did exactly this.

Methodology

We conducted the mentoring pilot for staff managers at MIT using the following methodology.

Assess need and determine objectives

There were clearly unmet needs and means at MIT for employees to access mentoring. Specific findings extracted from the 2012 Quality of Life Survey support the gap. “[For] those staff members who do expect to receive mentoring, less than half state that they receive adequate mentoring. Postdocs who expect to be mentored are most likely to believe they receive adequate mentoring (49 per cent responded “Yes” vs. 31 per cent “No”). For each of the other categories of staff (administrative, support, service, other academic and research) the majority of those expecting to receive mentoring felt they were not receiving adequate mentoring. As there is a clear correlation between receiving adequate mentoring and job satisfaction, this evidence suggests that a larger mentoring initiative for staff would likely result in more satisfied employees⁴.” An informal needs assessment was conducted which confirmed that mentoring was the appropriate approach.

The overall objective for the programme was to strengthen managers’ confidence and ability to manage and/or lead. The following were used to track progress and serve as ultimate success determinants.

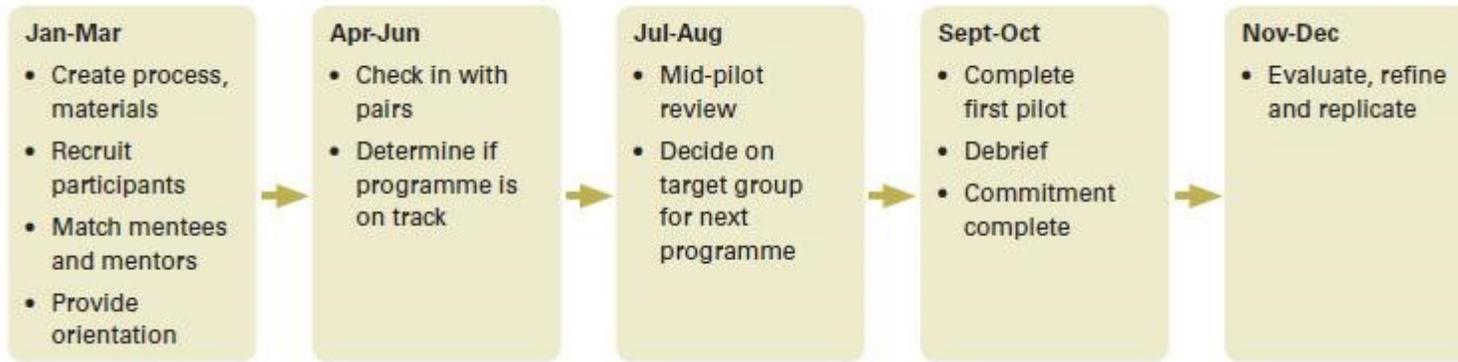
- Desirable mentor-mentee matching
- Established goals for the mentee to work on and their progress
- Demonstrated commitment to meeting at least once per month for six months Impact on the mentees’ ability to perform more effectively as managers from their perspective Mentees’ rating of the value and impact of the relationship on their performance Mentors’ perspective of mentees’ progress towards their established goals.

The vision was to employ mentoring as a strategy for developing stronger managers and leaders at a deeper level of learning that was not afforded to them otherwise. A successful pilot would be refined and replicated for broader use.

Timeline

A six-month timeline was created for tracking and programme management (see Figure 1)

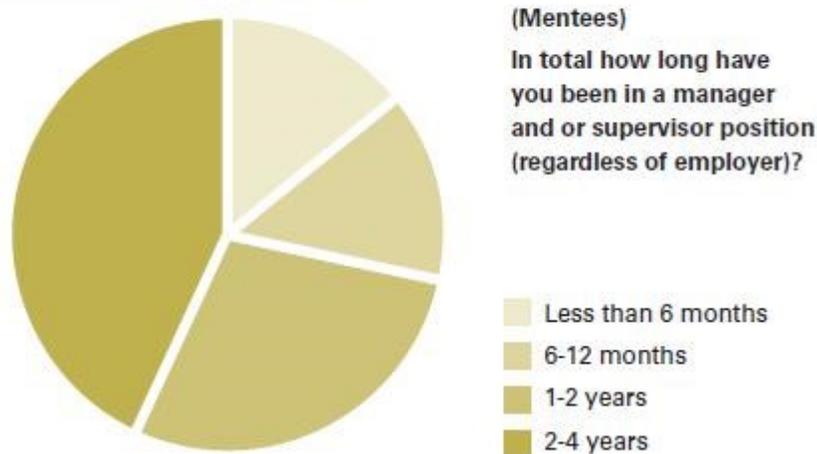
Figure 1: Pilot timeline



Participant selection

Fourteen cross-functional MIT managers were matched for a six-month commitment. Using a combination of written applications and committee process, seven mentee applicants were matched with seven experienced managers/directors. The mentee range of supervisor/manager experience was not less than six months and up to four years (see Figure 2). Mentors' managerial/leadership experience was over 11 years with one in the 5-10 year range. The programme was not intended for mentee performance remediation. Mentors were to be considered role models who met certain criteria (see Characteristics of selected mentors). All selected participants were vetted for any performance concerns.

Figure 2: Mentee supervisory/managerial experience



Orientation

The programme was launched with a two-hour orientation for all participants. Its purpose was to review the plan, expectations, related materials, and launch the mentoring partnerships. It was not considered 'training'.

Eliciting feedback involved three check points followed by a final post-pilot survey.

Two-month check-in

Two months allowed time to settle into the relationship and assess if the programme was on track. Brief check-ins were conducted with each individual. Most had not yet identified goals as they were still getting to know each other. All participants indicated they were pleased with their matches and had met at least twice. Sample anecdotes: *"It's already making a difference in my work. The good news is my partnership with.....has been going great. We have met three times, and after taking some time to get to know each other, we have figured out how best we can help each other."*

Second check-in

Participants met as a group. By all indications, the relationships and their work continued progressing positively.

Closing meeting

This had three objectives: to gain feedback about the whole programme, to mark the official end of the pilot and to acknowledge participants. In closing, each participant received a framed certificate of appreciation and a gift from the facilitators for their time and contribution.

Results

Six of the seven pairs completed the programme with a minimum of two one-hour meetings each month. Among other indicators, results were determined against the original programme objective. All participants reported 'good' to 'significant' for impact and 'as expected' to 'significantly better than expected' regarding the experience.

Mentees were in consensus that having a mentor from outside their own division was important. This was understandable given the sensitivity of their discussions. Eighty per cent of the pairs tackled a predominant combination of upward influencing and interpersonal relationships challenges. Mentees emphasised the importance of the matching process and the ability to develop trusting partnerships. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines mentor as, "a trusted counsellor or guide."⁵ Trust is the intersection among fictional Yoda, mythology and reality – the cornerstone of mentoring relationships.

To assess the structure and programme support, participants were asked if in retrospect they felt adequately prepared to participate. All mentees and mentors indicated 'yes', suggesting that communications, orientation and related materials were adequate.

Themes for improvement included: providing wider access to the programme; augmenting with learning resources; focusing attention on relationship first rather than goal setting and making the programme longer. In fact, five of the seven pairs mutually decided to continue meeting after the formal pilot completion. Predictably, the greatest challenge was scheduling meetings.

Payback for mentoring

A mentoring pilot is one way to determine if mentoring deserves merit in your organisation. The MIT pilot is a mere sample of mentoring success. Numerous organisations and industries recognise the significance of mentoring. In 2007, 71 per cent of Fortune 500 companies had a mentoring programme.⁹ In the UK, 60 per cent of business leaders have had mentors. Ninety-seven per cent of these indicated that their mentors' advice proved beneficial.¹⁰

The US Office of Personnel Management also had an organised programme for skill enhancement, career development; leadership and management development; and retention. "Mentoring is a tangible way to show employees that they are valued and that the company's future includes them."¹¹

Is mentoring merely a 'feel good' event for needy employees? Not so. Outcomes can be determined by subjective anecdotal accounts of behaviour and ability changes by mentees and their colleagues. One of my mentees reported: "My co-workers have seen an increase in my confidence over the past year." Quantitative evidence also justifies the business ROI of such a seemingly 'soft' strategy. Particularly, start-up companies and growing businesses have leveraged the power of mentoring for business development. For example, Caroline Kinsey, director at Cirkle Communications indicated, "Last year we grew by 20 per cent, and we've just re-launched our corporate identity. I'm immensely proud of what we've achieved and I know that mentoring has made a tangible difference to our team dynamic."¹²

Ample evidence of effective mentoring has been researched and collated by reputable sources. "Based on the 151 studies examined in this analysis, mentoring in business settings is generally associated with positive outcomes. In fact, more than 90 per cent of the studies involved reported some evidence of positive and beneficial outcomes."¹³

"A comprehensive study in 2006⁶ by Gartner, a Connecticut-based research firm of more than 1,000 workers over a fiveyear period, revealed the following benefits of mentoring:

- 25 per cent of employees who enrolled in a mentoring programme had a salary-grade change, while only five per cent of workers who did not participate in a mentoring programme had a change
- Mentors were promoted five times more often than those not in a mentoring programme
- Retention rates also were higher for both mentees (72 per cent) and mentors (69 per cent) than for employees who did not participate in a mentoring programme."¹⁴

Mentoring works in *Star Wars*, Greek mythology and 21st century down to earth businesses. Consider this unsolicited remark by one mentee. *"It made me feel "invested in" by MIT, by the mentor, by the programme, by HR and by you. I feel lucky to be part of this."* Realise the potential of cascading employee engagement in your organisation.

A fully-referenced version of this article is available on request.

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