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Why mentoring programmes and relationships fail

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By and large, organisations don't advertise their failures, especially when there is considerable prestige connected with them. So you won't read much about mentoring programmes that fail to deliver the goods. Even the academic literature has only a handful of studies that examine programmes or relationships that don't deliver. Yet understanding the causes of other people's failure is often the key to one's own success.

Both mentoring programmes and relationships fail from a variety of causes, which can be categorised into contextual, interpersonal or procedural. Let's look at them in that order.

Contextual problems for programmes relate primarily to issues of clarity of purpose or to the supportiveness of the organisational environment. For relationships, the key issues are again clarity of purpose, along with expectation by each party of the style of mentoring to be adopted.

The importance of clarity of purpose is illustrated by the case of the US-based multinational, which recently required its operations around the world to set up mentoring relationships between senior executives and hundreds of female employees. Participants knew that it was somehow related to the firm's equal opportunities drive, but no-one explained how mentoring was to contribute to this goal. Most of the relationships faded away within a few months, as both sides waited for the other to tell them what they should do. Clarity of purpose about the programme – why it is being done, what is expected of participants, what the respective roles and responsibilities of mentor and mentee are, and what the desired outcomes are – is directly correlated with clarity of purpose in the individual relationships.

Mentoring also requires a reasonable level of support from within the organisation. There have been examples where mentors and mentees have effectively been penalised for taking working time out for their meetings, because there is no specific time allowance under "billable hours" procedures. Lack of expressed interest by top management is also likely to undermine the programme.



Clarity of purpose within the relationship is critical for energising the relationship. Most relationships require a clear sense of purpose and a defined transition, which the mentee wishes to achieve. The clearer that transition is, the more focused the discussions and the easier it is to relate day-to-day issues to the larger goal. Even in relationships where the primary objective is for the mentee simply to have an occasional sounding board, unless that is agreed up front, one or both parties will feel dissatisfied.

It should be obvious that mentoring for, say, disaffected youths, requires a different approach from that for a senior executive. The mentees in these two examples will differ in their levels of learning maturity, self-esteem and the alternative resources they can call upon. Equally, different cultures demand different approaches to mentoring. Yet companies often assume that perceptions of mentoring are pretty standard. In reality, there are at least two major schools of mentoring and failure to clarify which is intended can cause confusion, argument and major misalignments of expectation between participants and between the organisation and the participants. The two schools can be characterised as the traditional – US originated, involving a considerable level of sponsorship or hands-on help, tapping into the authority or influence of the senior partner, with a focus mostly on career progress and primarily a one-way learning experience; and the developmental – much more of a two-way learning partnership, with the expectation that the mentee will do things for him- or herself, with the focus more on growing the less experienced person's capability, and owing its origins more to European experience.

Multinational companies, which have attempted to introduce mentoring around the world without taking these differences in mentoring style properly into account, are surprised when they meet resistance. It is a fundamental error to assume that everyone will have the same understanding of what mentoring is and what mentors should and shouldn't do. We have seen examples of programme failure both from European-based companies attempting to introduce programmes in their US subsidiaries and vice versa. Even in regions, the understanding of what constitutes mentoring can be radically different – in France, it can be seen as almost entirely sponsorship based; in large parts of Asia-Pacific a compromise between the two styles may often be required (or even, in one case, two mentors, one in each style!)

Interpersonal problems for programmes arise from the reactions of people who are not included in the pairings – for example, the mentee's line manager, in employment; or peers, in programmes directed at helping disaffected youths. Within relationships, the primary issues tend to hinge around incompatibility of personalities and personal values between mentor and mentee.



Failure to engage line managers and promote the benefits to them of the programme is a common omission. It is not surprising that many of them fear being exposed by discussions between their direct reports and other, possibly more senior, managers. Involving line managers in the design and overall management of the programme helps, as does briefing them about the advantages to them of having someone with whom the mentee can discuss in confidence how the mentee manages his or her key working relationships (and especially how he or she manages their boss).

In very informal programmes, or programmes with low clarity of purpose, resentment from people not included is common. So, too, is the gossip, especially with regard to cross-gender pairs. Openness about the programme and why it targets particular groups of people helps to overcome such problems.

Procedural problems arise from the way the programme or the relationship is managed. We often see programmes that are heavily over-managed. In one case (presented by the company concerned as best practice) mentors and mentees were given discussion sheets to create uniformity in what they talked about. The spontaneity and individual focus of effective mentoring were smothered by this over-attention. In another case, the opposite occurred. An enthusiastic HR function simply told people they were to be mentor and mentee and left them to it. When relationships ran into difficulty, or participants needed advice, there was no provision to support them and the HR professionals were too busy running the next initiative.

At a relationship level, mentors sometimes fail to establish an appropriate balance between being directive and laissez faire. Indeed, a core skill for a mentor is to recognise when to lead and when to enable the mentee to lead discussions. One of the most common complaints by mentees is that the mentor talks at them, rather than engaging them in reflective dialogue. Less common, but equally dysfunctional, is the mentor who never gives advice and is unable to adapt style to the mentee's needs at the time.



How to avoid the major pitfalls

Preparation

Time spent thinking through what the programme is meant to achieve and how each aspect of it should be managed, supported and measured will be amply repaid later. Engaging the stakeholder group in the planning identifies barriers to success and occasionally radically changes the nature of the programme. (In one case, feedback from the intended beneficiaries led to turning the programme on its head, so they became the mentors instead!)

Selection

Not everyone makes a good mentor. Some companies have assumed that the qualities of a manager or leader are such that they should automatically be able to perform the mentor's role. In practice, many managers are unable to escape from the habit of telling and advising. Many also lack the depth of self-awareness that characterises an effective mentor. In general, the more convinced someone is that they are a "natural" mentor, the more lethal they are likely to be.

Good practice avoids any suggestion of "shotgun marriages". It does not give people completely free choice of mentor, because they tend either not to seek enough challenge in the relationship, or to choose someone upon whose coat tails they can hang. Typically, a programme coordinator offers a selection of possible mentors, from which the mentee chooses. In this way, the mentee feels some ownership of the relationship and how it is to be managed. Selection by mentors has a dismal record and is best avoided.

Training

The most successful in-company mentoring programmes train both mentors and mentees and, at least, provide a detailed face-to-face briefing for line managers. The figures are stark. Without any training at all, less than one in three pairings will deliver significant results for either party. Training mentors alone raises the success rate to around 65%. Training both and educating line managers about the programme pushed the success rate above 90%, with both parties reporting substantial gains.

Process ownership

One reason for training both parties is so that mentees expect, and gradually acquire the confidence and skills, to manage the relationship; also, so that mentors know how to help them do so. Developmental mentoring, in particular, demands that the mentee helps the mentor to help them, by understanding the process and contributing to it.



Post-training support

Initial training is rarely enough to give mentors more than a basic level of competence and confidence. Experience of hundreds of programmes in more than three dozen countries shows that they both want and need access to continued expert guidance on how to do the role and develop their skills; and that they greatly value the opportunity to share experience with other mentors.

Measurement

Effective, appropriate measurement, especially at key points in the first 12 months, not only helps keep the programme on track, but also stimulates mentor and mentee to good practice – for example, reviewing the relationship and what each is gaining from it. Many companies are now adopting a “balanced scorecard” approach to measuring their mentoring programmes.

The bottom line

Estimates of what proportion of mentoring programmes fail to deliver significant benefits vary widely, depending on how success or failure is assessed. A good working estimate, however, would be that at least 40% do not meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Achieving a clear business purpose (e.g. improving retention in a target group of mentees by 25% or more)
- Achievement of most mentees’ personal development objectives
- Learning by most of the mentors
- Willingness of both parties to engage in mentoring (as mentor or mentee) again

...and many meet none of these.

A positive sign, however, is that more and more HR professionals are becoming knowledgeable about mentoring and recognise the value of anchoring it firmly in priority business needs. In addition, many of those companies, which have experienced initial failure, are now taking a more considered, mature look at the process and resourcing it properly.