

# People helping people to learn

In response to 'Making people count' (Editorial, *Business Executive*, November-December 1994) **Margo Murray** focuses on mentoring as a way of promoting skills.

## Evolution of the mentoring concept

The principles and practices of modelling and mentoring have been key elements in the continuity of art, craft, and commerce since ancient times. In the arts and crafts guilds a young person was apprenticed to a master who was considered to be excellent in the trade or profession. The master taught, coached, and guided the development of skills or arts. To become a master the apprentice's skills were judged from a work sample, such as a piece of silverware, a painting, or even a horseshoe. The word *masterpiece* originated from this sample of skilful work. People helping people to learn, a basic concept of mentoring, continues to be a cost-effective process.

The skills required of the new masters are as different from those of the apprentices of yore as the clean high-tech room is from the blacksmith's shop. Yet the process by which the skills are learned, one-to-one, are very much the same. Certainly mastering an art, craft, or profession increases one's marketability in diverse work places. This flexibility is essential in a world in which placement firms tell us staff will have an average of seven different jobs in their working lives.

In addition to the benefits to the individual, many organisations are now realizing the cost-effectiveness of mentoring and coaching in the transfer of technical and professional, as well as generic, skills. With leaner, flatter organisations it becomes increasingly important to determine the core competencies required to stay competitive. Further, these competencies must be constantly upgraded. During downsizing, or right-sizing, there is a great risk of serious skill drain when experienced people are let go. This tide can be stemmed by transferring the requisite skills and experiences in a facilitated mentoring process.

Perhaps an even greater risk is that of the retained staff believing that management no longer values its people. In a recent issue of *Business Executive*, Dr John Potter discussed performance appraisal and the impact it had on motivation of staff: "...unless our behaviour is in tune with our beliefs and values, [performance] improvement may be very short term." (Potter, 1994)

Our research reveals that mentors are far more likely to shape the beliefs and values about the organisation in positive ways than are the managers and supervisors who look at staff as if they **are** what they are now **doing**. Mentors rarely hold such a narrow view of people. Mentors expect protégés to grow to their fullest potential when they believe in themselves and value their own work. The Pygmalion effect still works!

## Myths about mentoring

The myths about mentoring continue to be expounded in all types of publications. Some of these myths can readily be dispelled by data from actual experience. Some others may be indicators of the potential pitfalls in mentoring processes. Those obstacles must be recognised and prevented from

jeopardising the success of a desired programme. A close look at the experience of the writers, and their references, reveal that they are citing data and publications that are more than five years old! Here are some common myths from recent articles.

- Women must seek men as mentors in an organisation in order to tap into power
- Mimicking a role model whose performance and behaviours are not always admirable and relevant limits one's growth
- One-to-one mentoring relationships will not succeed because mentors will not give the time
- Structuring or formalising a mentoring relationship will take the magic out of it.

Traditionally a mentor was an older, long-service person who selected his or her own protégés and took them firmly under one wing to guide the life-time career development of those lucky individuals. And they lived happily ever after. Or, when we read the dark side of the stories, we get the impression that the mentor used the protégé for work projects, took credit for the work, sometimes even abused the relationship, **and** the mentoring partner, and refused to let go when the protégé had outgrown the relationship. Further, these mythical mentors complained that this *neophyte* attached him/herself to the star's coat tails and expected to be carried along to success in the wake of the one who makes waves in the organisation. That description of a mentor is what we would define as a *role model* or *sponsor*.

The observer who strives to emulate a successful person, who may not be aware of the observer's regard, is not in what we would call a mentoring relationship. Similarly, the fortunate people who have sponsors recommending them for advantageous appointments or other benefits cannot be said to be in mentoring relationships.

## Reality today

Today mentors may be younger, and with less time in the organisation. They may have been hired with exceptional professional or technical skills. Or the mentoring relationship may be designed to transfer skills of peer specialists to each other to enable both of them to upgrade a combination of competencies. In organisations that are outplacing thousands of employees, the mentoring process is serving to transfer skills and experiences of those who are made redundant and leaving. Some retirees have volunteered to continue to function as mentors, maintaining contact with people in a place where they liked working, as well as contributing to its ongoing success.

## Who is using mentoring processes effectively?

The type of organisations that are using a facilitated mentoring process to increase competencies and loyalties of staff include: aerospace; banking; computer manufacture, sales & service; financial – credit card and systems; government power regulatory agency; hospitality; information systems; law enforcement; publishing; telecommunications; universities.

## Why implement mentoring when times are tough?

In today's lean (and sometimes mean!) times, no programme will be supported and stay in place unless it directly supports a goal or need of the organisation. Believe it or not, a manager was recently heard to say, "Maybe what we need here is a big lawsuit to make us move ahead with some improvement in our employees' skills development."

There are many more and better reasons than costly litigation to make the growth and development of people a priority. You need to look only as far as the bottom line – and every organisation has one, including charities – to find a good reason to facilitate the pursuit of masterly performance. Here are some of the "whys" for lean times:

- To make sure we are retaining the right people as we *rightsized*
- To attract and recruit people with the requisite skills and experience for tomorrow's demands
- To make our experienced and skilled people feel valued; to improve morale
- To increase the likelihood that we will survive
- To improve results – profit or other – with people who are more competent, confident, experienced, and motivated
- To ensure representation of diverse groups in all levels of the organisation
- To enable our people to learn to work with others with different education, ages, cultures, physical abilities, etc.
- To improve communication across functional or divisional lines

#### The results are in!

Twenty years of experience and current research reveal some significant and exciting outcomes of **facilitated** mentoring relationships. We define mentoring as the deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies, and facilitated mentoring as a structure and series of processes designed to create effective mentoring relationships, guide the desired behaviour change of those involved, and evaluate the results for the protégés, the mentors, and the organisation. The impact on the work environment as a result of these mentoring experiences is remarkable. When people are more competent, knowledgeable, confident, and motivated they contribute more to the bottom line results of the organisation. Multi-skilled, more flexible people add greater value to shrinking, leaner, flatter organisations. They can move across functions, work with different technologies, and are more open to learning new tasks. Further, they are more loyal to the organisation, and more likely to sustain their own motivation and to support necessary change when they have a broad range of experiences and are empowered to make decisions about their own career choices and development strategies.

How do we know that mentoring has an impact on the bottom line? What you measure is what you get. Successful organisations are implementing processes to measure the impact of the mentoring participants' experiences on the organisations' results, as well as the skills and experience levels of the protégés and the mentors. Here are some of the measured results attained in facilitated mentoring processes:

- Increased awareness by managers of the calibre of employees, their core competencies, and the available talent pool
- Higher ratings on evaluations of supervisors by subordinates
- Increased number of cross-functional transfers
- On 11 job essential skills, protégés increased skills by an average of 60%
- Gains in nine of 11 generic career and life effectiveness skills after 13 months
- Greater knowledge of the organisation and other divisions
- Increased retention of the best and brightest people.

Volumes of both specific and anecdotal data gathered in focus groups and from protégé development plans attest to the value added to the organisations as well as participants, both mentors and protégés. Of particular significance during times of rapid change is the frequent comment: "This process gave us an element of stability, and gave me an anchor, in a time of chaos".

#### What made it work?

The key success factors that mentoring pairs cite as having

impact on their relationship run the gamut from *assignment* to *zeal*. You might expect this spectrum in view of the range of jobs and types of organisations that are implementing facilitated mentoring processes. Here are a few examples gleaned from recent evaluation focus groups and written success stories of participants:

- Honesty in our discussions
- We established what our expectations were
- Despite distance between our [work] sites, we kept in touch via telephone and E-mail, and got together when [we were] in the same area
- We made it a priority to put our meetings on the calendar, and to meet on a regular basis
- We set objectives and met them
- Openness; feedback to each other
- Expertise and thorough knowledge of the field, ability to explain technical processes
- We meet every couple of weeks; a regular schedule is important
- Working with my partner is like trying to get a drink from a fire hose, so much energy!
- I learn as much as he does.

#### Conclusion

These results are not accidental – they don't happen by chance or magic. They are brought about with careful design and facilitation of people helping people to learn. The key to assurance of continuity of the mentoring process, and desired results, is to link it closely to the mission, goals, and priority strategies of the organisation. Separate *programmes* are extremely vulnerable to economic downturns, budget cuts, and changes of affection. Only an integrated, facilitated process which is linked to current and future mission or business imperatives can be expected to stand the buffeting of the winds of change. These rapidly changing environments demand multi-skilled, flexible workers – and masterly levels of the requisite core competencies. ■

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