

Upgrade Core Competencies with Mentoring

"Downsizing Doesn't Mean Drop Your Skills"

by Margo Murray

In the Fall 1994 issue of the BGS NEWS Professors Daniel J. McCarthy and Robert A. Millen described their studies of organizational renewal (Beyond Downsizing), acknowledging that "...cutting people alone is inadequate..." to improve the bottom-line. In this article Margo Murray, MBA, international consultant, and Beta Gamma Sigma member, suggests facilitated mentoring as a highly-effective strategy for improving the bottom-line in leaner, flatter organizations. Murray, a researcher, designer, and evaluator of facilitated mentoring processes, has implemented facilitated mentoring processes in more than 30 organizations in five countries with measured results. Her book, Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring: How to Facilitate an Effective Mentoring Program, includes many real-world examples drawn from twenty years of research and client experiences.

Evolution of the Mentoring Concept

The principles and practices of modeling and mentoring have been key elements in the continuity of art, craft, and commerce from ancient times. In the crafts and arts 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 in the trade or art. 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 skillful work.

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

In addition to the benefits to the individual, many organizations 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 organizations it becomes increasingly important to determine the core competencies required to stay competitive. Further, these competencies must be constantly upgraded. During downsizing, or rightsizing, 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.

Myths about Mentoring

The myths about mentoring continue to be expounded in all types of publications. Some of these myths can readily be dispelled with data from actual experience. Some may be indicators of potential pitfalls with mentoring processes that must be recognized and prevented from jeopardizing the success of a desired program. Many of these writers 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 organization in order to tap into power

Mimicking a role model whose performance and behaviors 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 formalizing 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 lifetime career development of these 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

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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 coattails and expected to be carried along to success in the wake of the one who makes waves in the organization. Both descriptions are 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 the mentor may very well be younger, and with less time in the organization. S/he 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 organizations that are outplacing thousands of employees, the mentoring process is serving to transfer skills and experience of those who are leaving. Some retirees have volunteered to function as mentors, maintaining contact with people in a place they liked working, as well as contributing to its continued success.

Who is Using Mentoring Processes Effectively?

The types of organizations that have implemented a facilitated mentoring process may be surprising. They include service organizations and nonprofits and manufacturing firms, and high tech and low tech industries.

Why Implement Mentoring When Times are Tough?

In today's lean (and sometimes mean) times, no *program* will be supported and stay in place unless it directly supports a goal or need of the organization. Believe it or not, a prospective client recently said, "Maybe what we need here is a big lawsuit to make us move ahead with some improvement in our employee skills development."

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

To make sure we are retaining the right people as we *rightsize*

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 increase the likelihood that we will survive

To improve results - profit or other - with people who are more competent, confident, experienced, and motivated

To assure representation of diverse groups in all levels of the organization

To enable our people to learn to work with others with different educations, ages, cultures, physical abilities, etc., etc.

To improve communication across functional or divisional lines

With leaner, flatter organizations it becomes increasingly important to determine the core competencies required to stay competitive.

What Skills are Being Mastered?

Here are a dozen examples of the types of skills being transferred today with facilitated mentoring processes in four well-known organizations. The job title of the protégé is listed, along with the specific growth objectives stated in the development or mentoring action plan.

Capital Projects Accountant -
Acquire trade relations experiences and purchasing skills



Commodity Manager -

Improve people skills; exposure and awareness to upper management activities; courage

Copy Center Manager -

Develop presentation skills, using multilingual capabilities

Electrical Design Engineer -

Develop finance and business proposals

International Trade Specialist -

Improve drive strength; time management skills

Market Development

Manager - Strengthen sales skills; improve balance between standing up for my rights and being more flexible

Personnel Relations

Manager - Improve skills with cost side; compensation and benefits skills

Project Coordinator -

Learn structure of the organization; gain job opportunities; develop skills with project management

Quality Program Manager -

Develop task-oriented approach to total quality management

Technical Services Center

Representative - Prioritize career goals, articulate and quantify "mini" steps to take to get to the long-term goal

Territory Representative -

Develop skills with handling customer visits

Warehouse Supervisor -

Learn company policies and procedures

The Results Are In!

Our twenty years' experience and current research reveals some significant and exciting outcomes of **facilitated** mentoring relationships. The impact on the work environments as a result of the mentoring experiences is remarkable. When people are more competent, knowledgeable, and confident they contribute more to the bottom-line results of the organization. Multiskilled, more flexible people add greater value to downsized, leaner, flatter organizations. They can move across functions, work with different technologies, and are more open to learning new tasks. Further, they are more loyal to the organization, 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 organizations are implementing, monitoring, and tracking processes to measure the impact of the mentoring participants' experiences on the organizations' results, as well as the skills and experience levels of the protégé and the mentors. Here are some of the measured results attained in facilitated mentoring processes:

Increased awareness by managers of the caliber 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 61%

Gains in 9 of 11 generic career and life effectiveness skills after 13 months

Greater knowledge of organization 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 organizations as well as participants, both mentors and protégé. 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, as you might expect, from the range of jobs and types of organizations 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, her 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. The key to assurance of continuity of the mentoring process, and desired results, is to closely link it to the mission, goals, and priority strategies of the organization. Separate programs 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 multiskilled, flexible workers and mastery levels of the core competencies.

FOR YOUR FURTHER READING

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