

# SHIFT YOUR FOCUS with modern mentoring

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BY RANDY EMELO

In the PwC 2015 U.S. CEO Survey, 78 percent of respondents said they are concerned about the availability of key skills in their employees and in the talent they recruit. Interestingly, while the skills gap continues to grow, so too does the range of skills that employers are looking for. Eighty percent of CEOs in the survey said they are looking for a much broader range of skills when they hire employees now.

One way to help employees (new and veteran alike) improve their skills is to offer them mentoring. But not just any mentoring—modern mentoring.

In a nutshell, modern mentoring is learning from the experience of others. It is collaborative and social learning where people form learning networks in which they can learn from others and share their own insights and knowledge. Modern mentoring is broad, open, and inclusive; anyone can take part, and all participants can be learners and advisers as it makes sense.



podcast

A new approach to mentoring connects mentees with numerous advisers via social and collaborative means.

While traditional mentoring has had a positive effect on companies and employees during the past few decades, the impact has been incredibly small because those programs often focus on only the elite few, such as high potentials. To gain more from relational learning, organizations need to expand their mentoring programs and implement a modern approach.

One of the keys to success with this approach is that leaders can solve critical business problems through its practice. People can collaborate and learn from one another across functions, generations, departments, and locations. This opens up the possibility for learning to be shared with those who need it from any and all sources within the organization. A small division in another state or country may have the solution a person at headquarters needs, but unless that person knows whom to ask, he will never know the answer. Modern mentoring allows those answers to surface through targeted learning engagements that strip down barriers between the haves and the have-nots.

## PEOPLE WANT IMMEDIATE AND ONGOING FEEDBACK AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

### Targeted topics

Global food services and facilities management company Sodexo uses a modern mentoring approach with its Expertise in Action collaborative learning groups (a prong of the company's broader Spirit of Mentoring program). Leveraging a web-based platform, employees join groups at will and direct their own learning and development. Topics of mutual interest include communication, strategic leadership, and networking, to name a few.

During the first three months of the Expertise in Action program, there was a 62 percent increase in use of the Spirit of Mentoring platform. In addition, 85 percent of participants said they can use the learning they gained through the Expertise in Action experience back on the job.

That is the gold standard: applying learning back on the job. Until it is connected to

actual daily work issues, mentoring will be a nice-to-have process that gets overlooked during the daily grind. Organizations have to get leaders and managers to use mentoring to solve real business problems. They must connect it to the issues they are facing and show how mentoring can help move their initiatives forward.

### In-role development

Data storage firm EMC Corporation brought this concept to life with an award-winning blended learning program for its newly hired technical support engineers. The company used modern mentoring software before, during, and after a two-week training event



to blend online instructor-led training with structured social learning activities. This allowed EMC to build a mentoring and collaborative learning environment where newly hired technical support engineers could learn from one another, reference materials from the training course while on the job, discuss concepts from the training course in the context of their jobs, and solve customer problems quickly and efficiently.

Using this approach, EMC transformed training into a more contextual and continuous learning process. Its blended learning method also provided structure for asynchronous online collaboration and conversations. Instructors had a new way to assign work, provide resources, monitor progress, check understanding, and solicit interaction and feedback.

Conversely, students could ask questions, contribute to discussions, and document assignment progress. EMC noted that passive attendance could not mask actual progression

through the material when it used this blended learning approach, and results prove that (see table below). The company also saved roughly \$270,000 by not having to pay for travel for people to attend a training course in person.

### Idea generation

This kind of mentoring is a powerful way to provide context and help people refine and build their skills, which in turn will allow them to put those skills to use on the job in a more timely and effective manner. Savvy organizations have begun using mentoring as a productivity tool, going well beyond its traditional role as a personal development tool geared toward career moves and career advancement. When mentoring is used as a productivity tool, people are able to learn from their peers and colleagues as a way to address skills gaps and learning needs—something we know CEOs are concerned about.

Mentoring can provide a unique way to learn

## New-Hire Training Results

	With Modern Mentoring Software	Instructor-led Training Only
Final Exam Scores (first attempt)	91.7%	80.8%
Final Exam Scores (second attempt)	95.7%	85.9%
I would recommend this course to others. (5-point scale)	4.8	4.6
This course will help me be more efficient, effective, or productive in my work. (5-point scale)	4.8	4.5
Time saved	4 hours per participant due to pre-work	-----
Money saved	\$270,000 due to reduced travel costs	-----

Source: *Modern Mentoring*. ATD Press, 2015.

## What's Holding You Back?

As organizations look to modernize their use of mentoring, they are likely to encounter resistance. These restraining forces typically become stronger when you begin to enact new mentoring practices. There also will be driving forces pushing for the change and trying to create a workforce where people learn from the experience of others. The restraining and driving forces both push against the ideal state you are trying to create (in this case, a modern mentoring culture), and have degrees of influence over that ideal state.

The driving forces working to create a modern mentoring culture are young workers, doing more with less, rapid change, and knowledge half-life. The restraining forces working against or resisting the change are traditional mindset, hierarchy, busy culture, outdated technology, and employees don't know how.

To create a sustainable change in organizational behavior, I suggest you convert several of the restraining forces into drivers. Try deploying these two strategies:

- Replace your outdated methods and technology to create and support a more connected and social mentoring experience. Part of your proof phase of implementing a more modern approach to mentoring should include the use of modern technology and terms.
- Solve a big productivity problem with modern mentoring in your proof phase. Do more than just improve an existing program such as high-potential development. Instead, determine a problem that will showcase how modern mentoring can increase productivity or save money.

These strategies will catch the attention of senior executives who are looking to increase productive collaboration and replace outdated systems, and they will help you have more influence through your driving forces.

that allows people to study a concept, ask probing questions of experts and peers, apply their new knowledge on the job, share their experiences with their mentoring cohorts, learn from the experiences of those around them, adjust their approach as needed when applying their new skills, and become more productive more quickly.

Talent development professionals can use modern mentoring through:

- groups that focus on cross-training employees across business functions
- learning projects that immerse employees in an emerging subject or topic of importance
- performance conversations between managers and employees that take performance management issues (that often get raised during annual performance reviews) and give people a way to do something about them.

### Performance conversations

Telecommunications firm Wide Open West leverages modern mentoring for its re-envisioned process for performance support conversations. The company ditched its traditional performance management process and implemented a new method that makes it a living conversation that occurs regularly between managers and direct reports.

Supervisors initiate coaching relationships with each direct report, and they take part in ongoing performance conversations with their employees that provide structured coaching and performance feedback that affects daily work. Together, managers and employees create learning engagements and development plans that embed competencies for development and incorporate prescheduled check-ins to ensure feedback occurs. This new process keeps all parties accountable and progressing forward.

People don't want to wait for feedback, and they don't want to be sent to a generic course six months after a need has been identified. People want immediate and ongoing feedback and development opportunities. They want to be able to tie their development directly to the

competencies and growth areas that will affect their daily work and their careers. Modern mentoring can support this through performance conversations, such as at Wide Open West.

### Keys to success

To help you bring modern mentoring to your organization, consider the following tips.

**Connect mentoring to where employees are in the employee life cycle.** Whether employees are entering, emerging, expert, or exiting, mentoring can be beneficial.

For example, onboarding is a natural fit for bringing this kind of mentoring to your entering employees. Get all new hires into a learning group that allows them to connect with one another and with near peers who can help orient them to the company. These new hires can then become emerging leaders and advisers for the next batch of initiates, creating a well-stocked pool of employees who can be a part of emerging learning networks.

**Focus your energy on bringing mentoring to the people who need to solve a real business problem.** Your audience should be the people who can use modern mentoring to affect the bottom line of the organization and use the process to address a real business challenge. This creates your ideal audience, and your program can grow from there.

Do not try to implement the program against a tracked learning program, such as high potentials, succession planning, or gender-based initiatives, which is where traditional mentoring historically exists. These do not provide a good proving ground for modern mentoring. Senior leaders already expect these programs to work well, and if you apply a modern approach to mentoring in one of these areas, you will get low attention and little funding.

Instead, take the approach to a critical job role where you can help employees learn and apply training back on the job faster. For example, use it with your sales function and help them explore new methodologies that they can apply more quickly in their daily work and show results for immediately. This will draw positive attention from senior leaders who control budgets and get you the proof you need that

modern mentoring is a must-have process.

**Architect the solution.** Don't just encourage modern mentoring and on-the-job learning from the sidelines. Instead, give managers and leaders an easy way to solve their problems. Provide the software to use with the learning and development structure already built in.

For example, Wide Open West isn't just telling its managers to have more frequent conversations with direct reports about performance issues. The company is giving them the right tools to allow these conversations to take place, be tracked, provide measures, and compare against competency needs.

People need to be given the right tools for the job, but once they get those tools, they also have to be held accountable for using the tools. So don't just be a cheerleader on the side, but rather be a partner who provides the necessary tools and creates the mandatory development program to ensure usage of the solution.

**Push for networked learning models.** As you well know, learning does not occur in a vacuum. Help people find and build their personal learning and mentoring networks that can grow and flex as their learning needs and expertise areas dictate.

An ideal mentoring network consists of between eight and 15 close connections, with many more loose connections on the outskirts of the network. Each connection represents someone in the person's network who either has something to teach or who has a learning need. As each person's competency areas grow and morph, their ability to give back to the mentoring network increases, just as their needs grow as they encounter new areas for learning.

By taking advantage of a networked learning model through modern mentoring, you will be helping the employees in your organization build the right support system they need to get personalized, immediate, and relevant learning that they can apply to their work and development.

■ **Randy Emelo** is president and CEO of River, a social learning and mentoring software company. He also is author of *Modern Mentoring* (ATD Press); [www.riversoftware.com](http://www.riversoftware.com).



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