



Mentoring: MORE THAN JUST A MATCH

Too often, mentoring leaders think their main work is finished once the match is made between mentee and mentor. Nothing could be further from the truth.



BY RANDY EMELO

Leading a mentoring program means more than just matching people and calling it a day. That single task barely scratches the surface of what it takes to effectively run a mentoring program. Mentoring administrators are part coach, part facilitator, part support network and part matchmaker. Learning leaders must consider these various aspects and take part in the mentoring program in multiple ways to make the programs work.

For example, they should help participants build self-awareness so they can gain deeper growth opportunities through mentoring. They also should give people a framework to have effective and productive developmental conversations so that learning goals can be

achieved during the mentoring relationships.

But mentoring administrators often miss the opportunity to create a robust, cohesive experience for participants, said Jenn Labin, author of “Mentoring Programs That Work” and principal partner at consulting group TERP Associates. The relationship match is just part of the overall journey. “Administrators and program leaders need to also provide mentees and mentors with tools to learn about each other’s history and communication preferences, such as mentoring agreements and assessments,” she explained. “They should also provide materials to support continued growth throughout the relationship, such as conversation guides and opportunities to measure progress.”

Jodi Davidson, director of diversity and inclusion initiatives at Sodexo, has experienced the complexity in establishing a mentoring relationship firsthand through her work on Sodexo’s Spirit of Mentoring program. “To build a best-in-class mentoring initiative and culture, the mentoring administrator must go far beyond the role of coordinator to that of a strategic partner.”

In addition to matching people up in relationships, the mentoring administrator needs to communicate effectively about the offer, evangelize through testimonials at various levels of the organization, track participation, measure success based on objectives and provide resources and tools that help participants maximize their partnerships, explains Davidson. “A program administrator needs to be someone who connects people, builds relationships at all levels, engages key stakeholders and becomes known as a confidante who is willing to evolve to meet the changing needs of the organization.”

Labin said administrators act as the gardener for the mentoring garden in an organization. They need to be responsive to questions, handle emergencies and provide communications throughout the program life cycle. Essentially, they need to remind, inspire and empower participants to keep up their momentum. “Administrators are the main touchpoint between participants and the organization.”

TRANSFORMATIVE MENTORING

When mentoring works, it can be transformative. It can impact an individual’s skill, ability, or career direction, which in turn can change a person’s life. Administrators and leaders can have a hand in these transformative powers by helping to build a sense of belonging and community through mentoring. One critical area that can make a significant difference is to design and support effective communication cycles that mentees and mentors can use in their relationships.

“Great mentoring relationships are built on open

communication and trust, both of which begin with transparency and credibility. Therefore, equipping participants with tools such as mentoring agreements or communication-style assessments allows participants to begin that open dialogue and start the relationship off warmly,” Labin said.

To build a communication cycle for a mentoring program, consider the following factors:

Focus and frame: Mentoring conversations need to have a focal point so they don’t meander. It is too easy — and common — for conversations between mentees and mentors to get off-track; it’s just human nature. While this free-form style can be generative at times, it does not serve the greater purpose of the mentoring relationship to engage in this behavior during every meeting. Participants can use their time more wisely by agreeing on mentoring goals and then framing their conversations around those goals.

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Mentoring administrators and leaders can help participants frame up their conversations by giving them a structure to follow. Encourage mentors and mentees to focus on goals, not objectives. That is, have both parties focus their attention on what they want to accomplish over the next six weeks, month or quarter. From there, participants can follow a conversational guide that encourages them to reflect on what they want to accomplish, envision what success could look like, explore options to bring their goals to reality, and then agree on any actions needed in pursuit of expressed goals.

Rhythm: Mentoring conversations should have a rhythm and flow to them. Each time the mentee and mentor meet, they should talk about what actions were taken since their last meeting, what worked, what didn’t work, what they could try next, etc. This becomes a cyclical conversation model they can follow throughout their relationship. By focusing on the smaller action items, they will make progress toward larger goals.

Administrators can model this type of conversational construct by facilitating a group mentoring relationship where they teach participants how to have effective conversations. “A well-run mentoring initiative requires dedicated resources in order to ensure participants, both mentees and mentors, have positive expe-

periences that encourage their growth and development,” Davidson said.

Frequency: The idea that mentoring will require too much of a person’s time is often used as an excuse for not participating in mentoring. Because of this objection, many leaders suggest that mentees and mentors meet once a month for one hour. This may not be the best advice. Much of that hour can be sucked up by people reconnecting and catching up on what has occurred over the past month. That is a lot to cover in one hour.

Rather than meeting only once a month, administrators should encourage people to meet every week for 30 minutes — via video, in person, over the phone, whatever works for the participants. These shorter touchpoints allow mentees and mentors to focus on smaller, incremental steps that, when taken each week, can lead mentees to their goals and keep the relationship moving along. Each 30-minute meeting can be spent reviewing what actions were taken since the previous week, assessing if progress was made, and generating ideas on how to take the next step toward reaching their goals. Each meeting should end with a concrete action that participants will take.

BUILDING SELF-AWARENESS

At its core, mentoring is a personal development process. Beyond matching people and helping them develop effective ways to meet and communicate, program administrators also should help people build self-awareness. “Self-awareness is key because both mentees and mentors need to bring their authentic selves to the relationship, and be open to the idea of growth and feedback,” Labin said. “Low self-awareness creates a problematic start to the relationship if either party isn’t ready or able to hear the gift of feedback.”

Administrators should provide appraisals and assessments that people can use in their mentoring relationships. Labin said assessments like DiSC, Myers-Briggs and StrengthsFinder are a few options. Leaders also can use categories of development to assist participants in gaining better self-awareness and ascertaining what the focus of their relationship is.

- **Career development:** People with this focus want to gain insight and understanding into advancement opportunities within their organization or vocation.
- **Leadership development:** People with this focus want to prepare themselves for management or

leadership responsibilities such as front-line, mid-level or executive.

- **Role development:** People with this focus want to take on a set of connected behaviors, responsibilities and norms associated with a specialized position or function such as head nurse or senior business analyst.

“Many practitioners and administrators are concerned about mismatches or matching individuals who can’t get along. Truly, that doesn’t happen as often as people think,” Labin said. And giving mentees and mentors a way to focus their development and interac-

tions through assessments and conversational guides gives them a solid foundation for growth.

Achieving success as a mentoring program administrator or leader means focusing on all of the aspects that make the program tick. “Remember that you can provide just the right resource, communication or tool that participants need to see real and lasting developmental progress,” Labin said.

Administrators should set aside uninterrupted time each week to respond to participant questions and create a robust experience for mentees and mentors. Program leaders also should ask for feedback from program participants and sponsors. “But most of all, find a mentor,” Labin said.

Organizations can play a vital role in supporting their mentoring program administrators and leaders, giving them the space and opportunity to lead programs effectively. “Our future leaders expect they will have access to learning opportunities that extend far beyond the traditional classroom, to include on-the-job coaching, feedback and mentoring,” Davidson said. “Therefore, mentoring is a key lever for achieving business goals and needs to be recognized as such.

“I am grateful Sodexo continues to invest in mentoring initiatives that have benefited so many as we fulfill our mission of quality of life. Perhaps the best advice I can give is for all of us to remain lifelong learners and become beneficiaries of our own mentoring programs. Walking the talk, as our executives at Sodexo have done for over a decade, makes all the difference between a mediocre and an award-winning program,” she said. **CLO**

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