Mentoring in the Networked Workplace

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What holds true for traditional one-on-one mentoring remains true for emerging models conducted from a distance: Virtual relationships require tangible trust.

Trust is a vital piece of today's networked mentoring landscape. In this environment, learning centers around sharing personal, tacit knowledge that is unique to individuals and their experiences.

This type of learning can create a highly contextualized interaction between people, where knowledge seekers discover how people accomplished their work, what they learned and how they overcame challenges. It also allows people to ask real-time questions as issues emerge so they are learning in the moment and seeing results immediately. That is in contrast with older mentoring models where people tend to meet once a month and have philosophical discussions about development.

This dynamic approach to mentored learning takes on a new layer of complexity when it occurs virtually and asynchronously. People need to close gaps in relational distance and form a trust bond with colleagues they may never meet in person. Challenging questions about how to build trust in these virtual relationships arise, such as: How do I learn to trust my colleagues in a short-lived situational mentoring relationship where we may only work together for a week or two? What about in a multi-person engagement where there are many different personalities and work styles at play? Can I really trust these people whom I've never met but who are now giving me advice or asking for my help through a Web-based mentoring program?

With more and more colleagues dispersed and working remotely, talent managers must help workers discover how they can engage in personal development and mentoring relationships with people they have never met. To do this they have to help them figure out how to build trust in virtual mentoring networks.

Trust in the Time of Remoteness

Trust is built when people exhibit competence in their areas of expertise and show integrity through their personal interactions with others. They willingly share their knowledge and insights, courageously explore areas for improvement and openly show respect for their mentoring cohorts.

In a virtual setting, people's personal reputation and character will be unlikely to deviate from how they are perceived in a face-to-face setting. They will simply use technology to help project the way they typically interact with others. If they are responsive, collaborative and supportive in their physical work world, this will come through in their virtual reputation as they engage their mentoring network. This lends itself to building trust and boosting engagement in mentoring among colleagues (Figure 1, page 28).

Organizational leaders can help trust flourish by encouraging people to follow a few guidelines that will build camaraderie and underscore their commitment to their mentoring network.

Give willingly and generously. People must have the desire and willingness to share knowledge and insights with their colleagues if they expect trust to form. Virtual mentoring networks today thrive in part because of people's civic mindedness and focus on the betterment of all. Creating an environment full of purpose and hope where others are able to find meaning and a strong sense of belonging is crucial in today's distributed organizations and virtual mentoring networks.
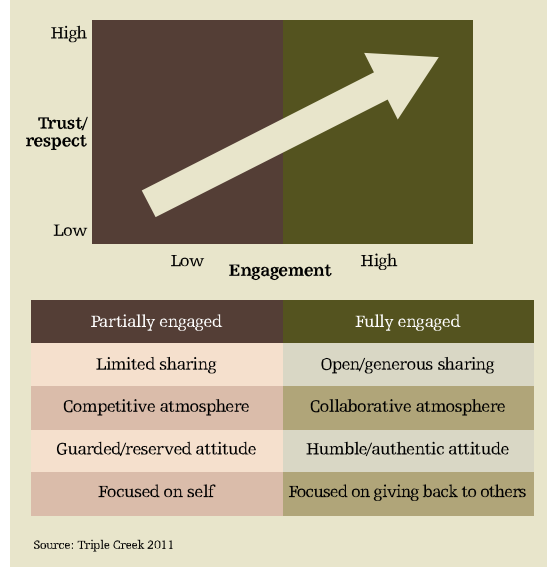
Openly sharing insights and understandings can create a more connected and responsive organization and can help establish trust among colleagues. Community exists when people come together to share a common purpose or interest, supporting and collaborating with one another to achieve something meaningful. It creates an environment of cooperation and synergy and establishes a mindset of shared effort where everyone contributes to the endeavors of other members. Building trust and community in this manner can help knowledge flow unimpeded throughout the organization.

Motivated by the betterment of mentoring colleagues, participants tend to operate out of a desire to serve others. They build trust among the group by being collaborative, sharing their know-how, giving time and energy and referencing the contributions of those they consulted. For this to work, there must be reciprocity and give and take that creates a graceful dance of knowledge, insights and understanding constantly flowing among the group. When one person has a need,

Partially engaged	Fully engaged
Limited sharing	Open/generous sharing
Competitive atmosphere	Collaborative atmosphere
Guarded/reserved attitude	Humble/authentic attitude
Focused on self	Focused on giving back to others

Source: Triple Creek 2011

others fill the gap. When that person has the ability to help someone else in need, he or she does so eagerly and enthusiastically. An example is people who are on-boarded through mentoring programs. Recent learners in these programs make great advisers for new hires and learners because they can anticipate their needs and help them acclimate to the culture.

People who exhibit generosity with their knowledge and time are often seen as approachable, engaging, authentic, personable and thoughtful. They take a personal interest in envisioning and encouraging others to become their best selves, and they seek out opportunities to highlight the positive attributes and unique contributions of people within the context of mentoring. They are genuine, caring members of the networked mentoring community who strive to give back to others around them.

Act humbly and courageously. One of the keys to building trust in a virtual mentoring network revolves around embodying the characteristics of humility and courageousness. People need to show they are willing to open up to others, be personally vulnerable to some degree and be humble in their interactions.

People who are authentic and brave in their mentoring engagements take risks, stretch themselves out of their comfort zone, eliminate excuses and engage in courageous conversations. These people share the warts and all and engage in knowledge sharing with a high level of transparency. That point is important because people need to share what went right and what went wrong so mistakes are not repeated. These types of collaborators solicit feedback, question their own beliefs based on new information presented to them and face their failures as learning opportunities. They admit when they don't know something, they ask for assistance, they listen to others in the group and they show genuine gratitude for the insights they gain from their mentoring cohorts. This stimulates authentic knowledge sharing and helps build a culture where people willingly share relevant emerging information that affects job demands.

A large part of mentoring and knowledge sharing involves revealing personal understandings about what may have gone wrong in the past or what lessons have been learned through previous experiences. Not everyone is willing to communicate these types of insights for fear of being seen as incompetent, unknowledgeable or foolish. However, when people are courageous enough to let down their guard and expose their vulnerabilities to others, deep and profound knowledge sharing can occur. As a result, trust is built among participants and commitment grows throughout the group.

To help people feel comfortable enough with their virtual mentoring networks to engage in these types of behaviors, everyone must act with integrity and hold one another accountable. Talent leaders need to establish and promote standards for these traits so people know how to act with integrity and high accountability when using modern mentoring technology to share knowledge across the enterprise. Accountability is a fundamental tool for creating trust between people, developing character and acquiring new competencies. Within mentoring networks, accountability is not just a mental exercise. It involves communicating developmental intent, deadlines and follow-up among the mentoring collaborators. In a sense, accountability is a learning tool that can be used in every mentoring conversation to ensure that intentions become actions.

Learners and advisers share their goals, commitments and aspirations with one another as they forge their virtual mentoring network. They ask for assistance, support and guidance from their colleagues and steadfastly hold one another accountable as equal partners in the knowledge-sharing endeavor. With this attitude in place, they can pursue mentoring that will lead to personal transformation.

Engage others honestly and openly. Honesty is vital to building trust because trust is based on confidence in other people's character. Trustworthy mentoring participants are frequently described as people who walk the talk, follow through on commitments and are consistent in their actions. In a word, these people act with integrity.

These points are important within mentoring networks today because when people have high personal character, others feel safe sharing personal information with them, voicing complaints to them and opening up and being vulnerable in front of them. People can evaluate the character of their collaborators by looking at if they follow through on promises, if they speak truthfully to others and if they act in a forthright manner.

Empathy plays a critical role in establishing character, because trust and commitment within the group can grow when people consider the perspectives and concerns of those around them. When people show empathy, they project a caring attitude and look at the whole picture to understand how oth-

The workplace is not a utopia, but by layering truth and honesty into the foundation of mentoring networks, people can build a virtual community where they establish trust among colleagues and create their own safe haven for learning and personal development.

Encouraging Productive Behaviors

Successful mentoring networks can take concentrated effort and commitment to make them thrive. Talent and learning leaders can help people attain this by encouraging the following behaviors within virtual mentoring networks:

- Express mutual appreciation for everyone's knowledge, time and energy.

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ers will be affected. They are able to create strong emotional bonds with others due to their honest and open communications. Empathy can help set the tone and work style within a virtual mentoring network and provide a positive foundation on which to grow.

Further, a degree of self-awareness is required to be honest and forthright within networked mentoring. People must understand their own personalities and work preferences for productive collaboration to occur. It also helps if people realize when they are distracted or overwhelmed by outside issues since this could detract from their attentiveness to their colleagues. Being mentally present and actively listening will help people ask meaningful questions and engage in conversation that probes more deeply to gain better understanding of the situation under discussion. This active listening can create more effective mentoring networks and build trust. If someone is not self-aware, talent managers can suggest improvements in performance management discussions and tie mentoring back to performance management activities.

- Show willingness to learn from and advise others collaboratively.

- Support the goals, needs and perspectives of everyone involved.

- Communicate openly and address issues when they arise.

- Encourage feedback to improve competencies and expertise.

- Create a confidential and safe place to learn.

Learning is a dynamic moving target that requires a flexible process for gathering insights and applying new understanding. Virtual mentoring networks offer a powerful and timely way to meet the learning demands of today's workforce. When trust and willingness are in place among the participants, unlocking the vault of personal knowledge through mentoring can create a transformational experience for all involved. **TM**

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