MENTORING PROGRAMS
A Key to Higher Productivity and Morale

Picture this scenario: You spend weeks, perhaps even months, recruiting a talented new employee. You carefully orient the new employee to the job. He starts the job, but within two weeks, a problem develops—a disagreement with a coworker, a dispute with the boss, a dislike for one or more of his duties. Within another two week, he’s gone. All your efforts in recruiting and training are for nothing.

More often than not, early departures of employees are the result of unresolved interpersonal problems on the job, or an inability on the part of the new employee to adjust to the informal demands of his new workplace. A prospective solution to the costly problem of early departures? Start a mentor program. Such a program, which pairs knowledgeable, senior employees with newcomers, allows you to orient new employees to the informal expectations and pressures of the workplace. Just as important, a mentor program gives you an opportunity to spot problems—and treat them—well before they deepen into employee dissatisfaction. Ultimately, this kind of program can help improve morale in the office, and even stabilize your work force.

Interested in setting up a mentor program? Here’s what it takes:

**Involve senior management.** If senior management—or, in the case of a small business, the owner/president—actively and visibly supports the mentor program, you’ll have no problem recruiting talented employees to serve as volunteer mentors. With managerial support, mentors will possess stature as leaders in the workplace—and will be perceived as problem solvers among the new employees they’re charged with helping.

**Identify a prospective group of mentors.** While the specific criteria for mentors will vary from business to business, you should be looking for individuals who enjoy respect among their colleagues. You should seek out individuals who understand the organization’s formal policies and procedures as well as the unwritten, informal expectations of the workplace. You should seek out employees who understand the organization’s history and philosophy, and who have proven themselves as dedicated, committed employees.
employees over the years. Since a mentoring assignment may last four to six months, you should identify a group of prospective mentors so that no individual mentor will be asked to guide more than one employee at a time.

**Assign mentors on the basis of comparability.** Again, the criteria for comparability will vary from firm to firm, but you should always look for a mentor-employee match that will foster open, unbroken communications. So, you probably won’t ask an estimator to serve as a mentor for someone who will be working out in the field on a regular basis. A desire for comparability might mean that you’ll want mentors to be roughly the same age as the employees they guide and, perhaps, share some of the same professional interests. You may wish to stipulate that mentors must work with employees from jobs other than their own; this helps prevent role conflicts between the new employee’s mentor and supervisor.

**Train your Mentors.** Mentor training should consist of an overview of the mentor program, an orientation to the role of the supervisor (the mentor, remember, should never supplant the role of the supervisor, but complement it), a basic overview of organizational policies and procedures, and a simple introduction to communication techniques. Training ultimately should help the mentor foster effective communication and unearth potential employee problems.

**Assign responsibility for the mentor program to a manager.** Responsibility for the program might be given to your human resources or personnel director, or to an experienced division or department manager. In some companies, a
highly respected employee might be asked to serve as chairperson of a mentoring committee. The bottom line: ongoing management support for the mentor program must be evident in the training, information and administrative assistance provided by the individual coordinating the program.

**Be sure your mentors maintain contact with new employees during key moments on the job.** What are “key moments?” Placement interviews. The opening or closing of training sessions. The new employee’s first staff meeting. Perhaps the first few lunch hours. Key moments include any other business or departmental events that may shape a new employee’s attitudes toward the job or the organization. It’s during these moments that job-related questions and problems may surface—and the mentor’s role becomes especially important.

**Offer mentors suggestions for employee growth activities.** From time to time, you might offer your mentors a series of questions they can use to elicit the true feelings
new employees hold about their jobs. You might offer your mentors suggestions on ways new employees can mix at business-related social gatherings. Or you might help your mentors design a simple evaluation tool they can use to assess employee job satisfaction two or three months into the job. While mentors use informal conversation as their prime guidance tool, they should be able to fall back on a few specific communication and assessment techniques that can foster professional growth on the part of new employees.

**Build supervisor support for the mentor program.** Nothing is more deadly in a mentor program than supervisors who feel their position or authority is threatened by the presence of mentors. Supervisors must receive positive information about the role and responsibilities of mentors—and must be able to distinguish between the informal support role mentors play and the formal managerial and oversight role played by supervisors.

**Be sure the coordinator of the mentor program is available for informal consultation.** Mentors must feel free to call the manager of the mentor program whenever problems or questions arise. After all, one of the purposes of the entire program is to provide a means to air and address potential problems before they become major problems. Beyond the consultative role, the program coordinator should be sure that mentors are affirmed periodically and provided with up-to-date information
on new organizational policies and mentoring techniques that work well. The coordinator also should be available for occasional “debriefing” of mentors, especially toward the end of mentoring assignments.

He ready to address employee concerns identified by the mentor. An organization with a commitment to a mentor program will put into place a simple process for the resolution of employee concerns and needs. This might simply mean that supervisors, human resource people and even coworkers are asked to assist new employees in specific ways. Or, it might mean informal counseling on the part of a supervisor once a mentor identifies a problem. A process for problem resolution shouldn’t force an organization to bend over backwards to meet the needs of new employees, but rather to open up the lines of communication necessary to help them overcome fears, concerns or misunderstandings.

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Conduct a formal “job satisfaction” evaluation at the end of each mentoring assignment. Mentoring assignments will usually run four to six months—the time it takes most new employees to become fully acclimated to their jobs. The evaluation should give new employees the opportunity to evaluate the helpfulness of the mentor, but more important, to assess the “comfort level” he feels with his job. The evaluation should be conducted toward the end of each mentoring assignment and, if the mentor-employ-
ee match has worked well, the evaluation should uncover an ability on the part of the new employee to make his own way in the workplace from that point on.

Put simply, the evaluation should reveal that the mentoring role worked—and that the informal guidance of the mentor is no longer needed. Positive outcomes like this are a tribute to the value and the success of mentor programs, for they acknowledge the satisfaction new employees feel toward their work and the satisfaction employers feel toward their valued new employees.

**About the Author**
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