

the power of mentoring

Mentoring is proving a powerful tool in staff retention, particularly among women.

Story Melissa Wilkinson

Having someone in your corner as you wade through the quagmire of politics and intrigue that typically plagues today's corporate environment can only be good.

The concept of a more experienced and wiser mentor guiding a younger and less experienced mentee in the ways of the world has been around for centuries. It's only since the early 1990s that the firms in the corporate sector have latched onto the value derived from using mentoring in the workplace.

While the terms coaching and mentoring are often used interchangeably, they are actually quite different in practice.

Put simply, a mentor is regarded as someone from whom you learn and a coach is someone with whom you learn a specific skill. A mentor is a bit like a trusted adviser who you can turn to during times of indecision, struggle or stress. Their role is to share insights and learnings from their own experience so that you can more easily navigate the challenges in your own life.

Mentoring is far more effective when the mentor is not in charge of your pay packet

Mentors are more focused on creating an environment where mentees have the opportunity to develop at their own pace. Coaches tend to be more directive by taking control of a situation and being more assertive around skills development and performance management.

BENEFITS OF MENTORING

In-house and external mentoring programs are being implemented in large numbers as companies use them to help foster and grow high potential talent. Mentoring is being used to diversify the leadership pipeline and groom up-and-coming leaders for the future.

A 2008 survey of nearly 500 chief

executives undertaken by Deloitte and the Australian Industry Group found that CEOs now rate mentoring as the second most useful method of upskilling staff. In a skills-short environment, mentoring is also seen as a powerful way to retain employees, particularly women.

Corporate educator and founder of McCarthy Mentoring, Wendy McCarthy AO, says that a classic departure point for female employees from an organisation is when they take maternity leave.

"Many organisations are using mentoring as a way to keep more women in the workforce as it can be very expensive for them to leave. That's why setting up mentoring relationships between women who have faced the career-family challenge and younger women is becoming much more common.

"Mentors can help new mothers negotiate better work arrangements and also help them take a more strategic perspective on

their careers. At a broader level, mentors help individuals feel valued. This is good because it reduces the risk of people throwing hissy fits and leaving their organisations because no-one has time for them.

"It's also a rewarding experience for mentors. When you have a mentee looking to you for guidance, it makes you bigger than yourself. I've found that many men in particular benefit from being mentors."

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MENTOR?

While it's common to have more than one mentor giving you support for different parts of your life, there are a number of attributes common to effective mentors.

The number one factor is curiosity and interest in helping another person develop his or her career.

A mentor must be interested in finding out what motivates the mentee and be willing to suspend their own judgment. They usually have strong interpersonal skills, are professionally successful and well connected. They don't have to be the same sex or work in the same organisation or sector.

McCarthy's coaching business deliberately matches mentees with external mentors.

"We don't recommend that mentoring relationships be created with internal staff as mentoring is far more effective when the mentor is not in charge of your pay packet."

TYPES OF MENTORING

Mentoring relationships can be established through formal and informal ways. KPMG, for example, runs a leaders mentoring program for newly admitted partners.

Lisa Geerling, national HR manager for Learning & Development, says that the program helps new partners make a smooth transition to the more senior role.

"We encourage the new partners to identify who would be a suitable in-house mentor for them and this is often someone outside their practice area and immediate location. Mentors try to help them take a much broader view of the firm as they are now representing the entire organisation as a partner. We encourage all our people to take responsibility for their careers and be proactive in building solid mentoring relationships."

It's not only at the more senior, high potential level that mentoring can be powerful. To complete the Graduate Diploma in Chartered Accounting, aspiring Chartered Accountants must gain six months' worth of experience under the careful watch of a mentor. Tracy Gower from the Institute says that mentoring is seen as a valuable part

of the process of becoming a professional accountant.

“Feedback from the CA Program shows that the mentoring component helps candidates open conversations with high level accountants. A July 2007 survey found that more than 90 per cent of candidates had at least monthly contact with their mentors.”

Another type of formal program attracting interest from young financial executives is the FEI Mentoring Program. Started by the Financial Executives International of Australia (FEI), the 12-month program matches chief financial officers from predominantly listed companies with young financial executives. The program runs in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and in 2008-09 it will match more than 40 mentors with mentees.

Chad Barton CA is the CFO at technology company EDS Australia and says that he was at a real fork in the road before he started the FEI mentoring program.

“I didn’t know whether to stay as a CFO or go down a more operational path. My mentor, Tim Regan, who was the CFO at Mirvac at the time, helped me to get clarity about the right direction for my career. Tim challenged me to think about my career and he allowed me to spend some time with him to understand his role. It was a fantastic opportunity as you don’t often get the chance to sit down with the CFO of a major company and learn from their experience.”

TIPS AND TRICKS

According to McCarthy, one of the downsides from mentoring’s popularity is that having a corporate program has become a bit of a trophy in some organisations.

“I’m seeing companies say ‘I have to have

one of these’ because other competitors in their sector have one. However, unless there is commitment from the top-down and particularly from the mentee, then the programs won’t go anywhere. The mentee must drive it and be willing to get involved.

“The other issue that I see is that people don’t fully understand the role of each person in the relationship. A mentor is not there to be your mother or father or even boss you around. They’re there to provide a reflective space for you to solve your own issues. When you graduate from your mentor, you’re much more trusting of your own voice.”

Like any healthy human relationship, confidentiality, trust and chemistry are critical ingredients. Mentoring relationships are no different as both people need to be open, willing and committed to fostering the relationship.

If your workplace doesn’t have formal mentoring programs in place, don’t despair. Informal relationships are very common and simply involve the mentee approaching a potential mentor for an initial discussion. Some mentees can feel intimidated about approaching more senior executives, but mentors are often incredibly flattered to share their experiences.

A TWO-WAY STREET

Anne Loveridge is a partner in the financial services practice of PricewaterhouseCoopers and has been both a mentee and mentor during her career.

“Mentoring has played a powerful role around key career and lifetime milestones for me. I see mentoring as having a relationship with someone who cares about you as a

TIPS ON CHOOSING A MENTOR OR COACH

- Do you have a preference for the industries in which the mentor or coach has experiencing in coaching?
- Are you looking for a mentor or coach who has professional industry experience in a similar role or industry as yourself?
- Would you prefer someone with management experience irrespective of the industry?
- Is your preference for face-to-face sessions, via telephone or a combination of both?
- Is it necessary for this person to have the same or similar cultural background as you?
- Would you prefer a male or female mentor

or coach?

- Does this person need to have the same personal interests as you?
- Does the mentor or coach need to be someone who has the same marital status and/or an understanding of raising a family?
- Are you expecting to catch up with this person in your own private time? Is this person available after hours or on weekends?
- How important to you are the perceived life experiences of the mentor or coach?
- How aligned is the mentor or coach with your own personal values?

Source: Gerri Binns, director, people and performance, Deloitte





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person. It's bigger than just the career piece. It's important that you feel that you can talk openly and honestly about your career aspirations in the context of broader life goals and values.

"I started my first mentoring relationship around the time when I was having a family. It was quite unusual back then for women to have a family and also pursue a career. My male mentor gave me confidence to keep working and over the last 15 years he has been influential in challenging me to step up to leadership positions.

"Some interviews with female PwC leaders across a number of territories showed that mentors were a common factor in their career progression. As a result, we've tried to replicate that internally by setting up programs like mentoring circles which are designed for women. These are monthly facilitated discussions where senior women and partners talk about their experiences and share their challenges and successes."

Genesee Rock, a director in financial service assurance at PwC, is Anne's mentee.


"Anne has given me support and guidance through a number of difficult career milestones. My relationship with Anne has been successful because she has a genuine interest in me and is experienced and really knowledgeable in her practice area. Importantly, she manages her work-life balance in a way that I respect and admire."

MENTORING TRENDS

With mentoring and coaching becoming much more common in the workplace, a number of new trends are emerging.

Co-founder of The European Mentoring and Coaching Council, Professor David Clutterbuck, says that global trends in mentoring show that e-mentoring and e-coaching actually work.

"These forms of mentoring were initially dismissed by many coaches and mentors (including me) as a pale imitation of face-to-face learning relationships. However, e-mentoring and e-coaching have in fact proven highly effective. They offer a different alternative, in which time to think between questions and answers is built into the process.

"By contrast, we found that telephone coaching and mentoring have few of the advantages and many of the disadvantages of face-to-face and virtual relationships. While very effective practitioners can make a telephone session work, this is not the norm." 

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- mccarthymentoring.com
- fei.org.au
- clutterbuckassociates.com
- menttium.com

