

Opinion

The evolving business case for mentoring

by Wendy McCarthy AO Nov 07

It is a common experience in our mentoring practice that organisations approach us to discuss mentoring for high potential and valuable staff. It is a reward for performance and loyalty. The mentee enters into a private and confidential relationship that assists them to think more strategically about their life and career. The usual outcome is that the mentee becomes more motivated, focused and grows in confidence.

In addition, there can be benefits for the whole organisation. International research¹ tells us that people with mentors are up to 13 times less likely to leave and that generally there's an improvement company-wide in communication, motivation and succession planning. Our own evaluation would support these findings.

Broadly, this is the business case for mentoring. However, each organisation presents different people, objectives and expectations and subsequently each mentoring program is tailored to meet those factors. In our experience mentoring has been a key strategy to increase the numbers of women in senior management, to broaden cultural diversity in organisations, and to assist women returning to the workplace after maternity leave. Mentoring can not work in a vacuum without other supporting policies; however the power of one to one can be very dynamic.

The first mentoring program I undertook was definitely about talent retention and decreasing turnover. The turnover in the company was extremely high and the Chief Executive was also concerned that bringing new talent into the senior management team was met with hostility. The business case in terms of a clear financial bottom line was therefore about reducing turnover and retaining talent.

A Human Resources Director of a global company and one of our clients said this about mentoring in 2001. 'The return on investment is astronomical. The cost is peanuts. Recruitment is more expensive than mentoring. Of the 30 senior managers mentored since 1996, only one had left the company by 2001'.¹

The second bottom line was about looking at the composition of the senior management team and increasing its diversity. Mentors were offered to the existing team to help them look more broadly at these issues and they were also offered to new members of the team. The Chief Executive decided that one on one support for these people would be the most effective strategy to achieve this goal.

Asked by a professional services firm to assist with the retention of women, the company had made the business case around cost of recruitment, investment and the loss of the women – mostly in their middle thirties. Our response was to encourage more transparency in the company about how to succeed in the senior ranks and how to manage career interruptions. One solution was to ensure that the women on maternity leave stay with a mentor, ideally someone whose shoes they could walk in, who they felt had a simpatico with them.

Mentees gain from mentoring in a variety of ways. They gain an insight into management processes and learn how to manage up much more effectively. This can be crucial with high potential people who without that skill frequently walk out the door and look for another pasture. The rapid learning that occurs with an experienced senior mentor can save that expense and heartache.

The mentee better understands how the organisation functions, meets some broader external networks and begins to understand the generic nature of business life. The mentee is better able to analyse what's positive and negative in their environment and what can be changed.

The building of self esteem and confidence, of trusting your own voice and learning to navigate and negotiate through management offers some significant leadership training. Watching people in a professional service firm understand that becoming a partner was not just about being a bright graduate on a trajectory that would be reached automatically has offered some powerful insights into the expectations of Gen Ys and Gen Xs.

Another interesting cost often not factored in that can be averted by effective mentoring is the cost of the gap between the departure of one person and the arrival and training of another especially at senior level where the departure is frequently unexpected.

If there is a critical mass of senior people being mentored within an organisation it does tend to change the culture. Mentoring can lead to increased discussion of corporate values and culture and play a role in their evolution. Ideally, mentoring becomes a critical part of career development, succession planning and assists in what I call creating a mentoring climate.

The business case for mentoring is always paramount, but how it is defined is an evolving discussion. Seeing the results in our mentees is ultimately the most compelling argument.

"It has made me stop and evaluate my personal skills and failings. I now feel more confident undertaking my day to day work. I look at each task more strategically and identify my strengths and what I can do well and am more open and honest with myself about bringing in others who have the skills I lack. I remain amazed at how appropriate the match is, both in a business and personal sense."

"In terms of personal and professional development, this has been the best for me in my 19 year financial services career."

"*** has been extremely valuable in helping me to be more upfront in identifying my wants and needs with myself and those I work with. The result has been, to my surprise, positive and encouraging in my work and personal life."

"Getting advice from someone who has 'been there and done that' is invaluable."

"My mentor has given me some practical ideas about career progression and networking that are obviously not specific but have been very helpful. Also, by giving her own experiences as examples, she has given me the confidence that I can take time out and/or diverge from my career path and still come back to a successful career."

"It has been very beneficial for me to talk to a person who has faced similar challenges in her career. I feel very comfortable discussing issues (both personal and professional) with my mentor and she is always able to offer guidance, suggestions, inspiration or even just support. She does understand the nature of corporate life but at the same time is able to bring some different perspectives."

Sources

- 1 David Clutterbuck, Everyone Needs a Mentor, CIPD, 2006.
- 2 'Mentoring gets the thumbs up' *BRW* May 2001.