

# Improving the Mentoring Process

This no-nonsense approach gets around the usual interpersonal and organizational problems that inhibit mentoring.

By KATHY E. KRAM

**M**entoring—the broad range of developmental relationships between juniors and seniors and among peers—rarely achieves its potential. Most often, mentors are available to only a few high-potential managers. Those not labeled as “fast trackers” are less likely to find the guidance, coaching, challenging assignments and other opportunities that encourage individuals and organizations to develop their human resources fully.

Recent work suggests that organizations can facilitate effective mentoring by creating certain conditions. The role of the HRD practitioner in helping build interpersonal skills, a reward system, task structures and management practices that support developmental alliances is vital. Legitimizing interaction between juniors and seniors through formal mentoring programs is a common response; unfortunately, the risks usually outweigh the benefits. Those who are not matched become resentful and increasingly pessimistic about their career prospects; those who are matched can feel burdened by the new responsibility; and immediate supervisors may be threatened by a program that appears to undermine their authority. While some relationships become helpful and enduring, more often than not, the matched pairs remain superficial alliances at best.

Involving an organization in a systematic diagnosis of the obstacles to effective mentoring is an organization development alternative to formal mentoring programs. The results are educational offerings or changes in systems, norms or pro-

cedures that directly address the forces limiting developmental relationships.

An organizational development approach to improving the mentoring process involves four steps: defining the objectives and scope of the project; diagnosing the individual and organization circumstances promoting or interfering with effective mentoring; implementing educational programs, changes in the reward system, task design, or other management practices; and evaluating the intervention to determine what modifications are needed.

## Why develop mentors?

Why make the effort to improve the mentoring process? Isn't this just window dressing for improving interpersonal communication—a subject for which senior managers have little time? Without objectives that are related directly to existing business and human resource strategies, efforts to improve mentoring can appear superfluous.

participate in shaping and implementing objectives. In one firm, an affirmative action committee made up of men and women of various races worked with the human resource staff. Together, they developed education for improving cross-gender and cross-race mentor relationships among the firm's young engineers.

In another instance, education on mentoring was incorporated into a career planning program already in place. Managers, engineers and technicians in this program learned about the role of mentoring in employee development, as well as skills for self-assessment and career planning. The mentoring concept was introduced as another important development tool, consistent with existing programs.

Excellent education is of little value if the surrounding culture does not encourage application of knowledge and skills. Senior management involvement is necessary for initiating and supporting system-wide changes in norms and practices, as well as for allocating budgetary resources.

## Diagnosing circumstances

Collecting data about the factors that promote and inhibit developmental relationships is a critical second step. If individuals report little understanding of how developmental relationships support career advancement and personal growth at each career stage, then education is needed. Alternatively, if data suggest that people development activities are perceived as unimportant, then changes in the reward system and the organization's culture are needed for educational intervention to have an impact. A diagnosis should include information about individuals' attitudes, knowledge and in-

## The risks of formal mentoring programs usually outweigh the benefits

The focus of the mentoring process must be relevant. For example, in growing organizations, mentoring can be critical for socializing new members. In mature organizations that no longer hire or promote heavily, mentoring or coaching offers creative ways for keeping plateaued managers involved. Once the focus is identified, target audiences should

terpersonal skills, and how the reward system, performance management systems, task design and the organization's culture shape the quality of relationships.

Interviews with organization members highlight factors that encourage mentoring behavior. Task design may already foster frequent interaction between juniors and seniors or among peers. Pro-

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ject teams and task forces encourage collaboration and offer opportunities to form developmental alliances. Or, performance appraisal and career planning systems may make discussing career planning and other concerns legitimate, thereby allowing managers to serve as mentors to their subordinates.

Other conditions impede constructive mentoring. Potential mentors may be opposed to the concept because they never received mentoring, or they are experiencing career blocks that extinguish the desire to support junior colleagues. Potential proteges may be skeptical if they do not trust senior managers' motives, if they do not respect the competence and advice of senior colleagues, or if they do not have the attitudes and interpersonal skills to initiate relationships with potential mentors. Finally, senior management resistance can stem from a results orientation that overrides interest in people development objectives.

### Implementing change

Insight from the diagnosis should be reviewed with the liaison group to determine appropriate actions. Usually, both education and organizational changes are warranted. Education provides the opportunity to acquire requisite knowledge and skills for developing supportive alliances, and changes in the reward system, task design and other systems are designed to accommodate change efforts. In organizations where the culture and practices encourage mentoring and reward development activities, education may be sufficient. In most settings, obstacles to building relationships are substantial.

In addition to increasing understanding and interpersonal skills, education minimizes resistance. In an education workshop, skeptics and supporters can discuss the role of mentoring in careers and make choices about how to enhance its value, both personally and for the organization. Introducing senior management to education on the role of mentoring in career development before addressing middle managers to the concepts is an effective strategy when resistance exists at all levels.

Education can be designed for individuals at any career stage and it can be offered to homogenous or heterogenous groups. The specifics of a situation determine which options are most appropriate. In all instances, offerings should combine conceptual input, discussions, self-assessment exercises, role plays and planning for application. Since developmen-

tal concerns shape one's willingness and capacity to build developmental relationships, participants benefit most from examining their own career stages.

In early career stages, individuals want to know how coaching and counseling from senior colleagues enhance development and how to encourage such interaction in the organization. Midcareer individuals need to assess whether helping others enhances or threatens self-esteem.

Education based on a thorough needs assessment for establishes the attitudes and interpersonal skills that support developmental relationships. Dialogue with senior managers peaks the interest and involvement of those who can modify inhibiting features, such as the reward system or work design. Finally, if the diagnostic step indicates that insufficient resources for education exist, or that changes in work design or reward systems require more study and human effort than is available, interventions should be postponed until priorities change.

### Evaluating and monitoring impact

Assessing programs does more than indicate whether or not the commitment, energy and human resources spent have had their intended impact. Systematic evaluation informs potential participants of a program's value, demonstrates to senior managers that investment in such programs benefits individuals and the organization, and highlights what changes are needed to encourage effective mentoring at all career stages.

Ideally, evaluation of training and development efforts includes pre-tests, post-tests and long-term follow-up with participants and control groups. Questionnaires or interviews reveal participants' attitudes toward mentoring, their understanding of the mentoring process and their perceptions of the organizational climate.

Using both experimental and control groups for follow-up evaluation often is impractical. Monitoring participant groups over time is more realistic. Monitoring sheds light on changes in attitudes, improvements in interpersonal and self-awareness skills, and whether or not barriers to application remain. The human resource staff can use this information to improve programs. If little application of learned skills is evident and information from follow-up observations indicates that managers don't believe mentoring is valued by superiors, then modifications in the reward system are

needed. If midcareer managers still resist mentoring roles, a human resource specialist may act as a third-party consultant, or the opportunities for midcareer employees may need to be changed.

Monitoring reveals how education can be improved, leading to the next four-step cycle of diagnosis, implementation, change and evaluation.

### Is a mentoring program really the answer?

The temptation is great to latch onto a program that can be implemented quickly and efficiently. However, failure to define objectives and conduct a diagnosis can promote resistance among those who should benefit from the process. Rather than introduce a formal mentoring program, the HRD professional should establish a sequence of programs and organizational changes that *support* rather than force the mentoring process. Taking the time to involve organizational members in a collaborative approach pays off.

If objectives support other human resource and business goals, the necessary commitments are likely to be forthcoming. An organizational approach to mentoring affects the whole organization, and requires time, patience and effort. This is certainly more useful than a formal program with little relevance for the individuals and the organization involved.

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