

Training and Retaining High-Caliber Employees: A Successful Mentoring Program

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The emphasis on mentoring in today's engineering consulting firms has become a necessary component, not only for training purposes but for retaining high-caliber employees as well. Mentoring programs help establish relationships among employees and promote an individual's growth—technically, professionally, and personally in all stages of his or her career.

Currently there are hundreds of major corporations that use formal mentoring programs to train their employees. These corporations realize that these programs create a sense of community within the organization, while at the same time encouraging their employees to develop to their fullest potential. LBFH Inc. recognized the importance of well-rounded, successful employees and created a mentoring program available to everyone within the organization.

With today's fast-paced, changing economy, engineering firms need to prepare for the future and set their goal to attract prospective hires, then retain those employees in whom they have invested training. A successful mentoring program can help meet this goal.

The Mentoring Program

Although it is most likely that informal mentoring relationships will occur and flourish within the firm, having a formal mentoring program has many advantages. Other than the fact that a formal mentoring program will help attract prospective hires and then retain those employees, it will also allow those within the program to set performance-based goals that can be beneficial to the entire firm.

For example, if a senior-level engineer is paired with a junior engineer in a mentoring relationship, part of their mentoring activities could include working together to assist the junior engineering in reviewing plans. To help perform this task, both the senior engineer and junior engineer can work together to establish quality assurance/quality control checklists for different types of projects. Once these checklists are completed, the entire company can then use them.

Once you decide that you would like to start a mentoring program within your organization, the next step is to decide the scope of the program and how it will be managed. Creating a committee can be your solution to managing the program, especially if there will be over 20 mentoring relationships going on at a given time. In addition, the mentoring committee will be a source of ideas for planning activities and adding new features to the program. Select a representative mix of people to serve on the committee (administrative staff and engineers, both entry-level and experienced). This will help the committee develop a big-picture view of the needs within the company, as well as give the employees within the firm a message that everyone is important to the mentoring program and the company cares about their professional and personal development. It also may be useful to have someone on the human resources staff be a part of the committee, since that person will have information about new employees and prospective hires, and will be able to handle coordination between various offices when necessary.

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The committee can be used to track the progress and success of mentoring relationships within the firm, resolve any relationship conflicts that may occur, create a yearly budget for the program, and plan social activities revolving around the program.

Once the committee has been selected and formed, its members can focus on the mentor and mentee (protégé, or the person who is being mentored) relationships within the firm. Reinforce to your employees that the program is not something enforced upon them; both those being mentored and those doing the mentoring must be willing to participate. It is suggested that mentees choose their own mentors. There are no defined rules with these relationships; however, experience has shown that it is not wise to allow a direct supervisor (someone who determines yearly raises, bonuses, etc.) to match up with one of his or her employees. There are potential conflict areas in which both the mentor and mentee in this case would not reap the full benefits of this relationship.

If mentees are allowed to choose their own mentors, they should name their top three choices instead of choosing only one mentor. This will avoid the potential problem of one mentor having too many mentees, or in rare cases, the committee may feel that the selected mentor is not a suitable candidate.

The committee should then ask anyone who has been chosen as a prospective mentor if he or she would be willing to start a mentoring relationship with the prospective mentee. This procedure allows the prospective mentor to be honest about whether he or she is willing to have a relationship with the mentee instead of feeling obligated to accept if the mentee asked directly.

Once a mentor-mentee match has been established within the program, it should be the committee's responsibility to

- ✓ **75% of overall executives said mentoring played a key role in their career. (source: ASTD)**
- ✓ **77% of companies report that mentoring programs were effective in increased retention. (source: Center for Creative Leadership)**
- ✓ **Over 60% of surveyed college and graduate students list mentoring as a criteria for selecting an employer after graduation. (source: MMHA)**

track the relationship to see that it is running smoothly and that both participants are content. This is very important during the first few months. The committee can contact both the mentor and mentee on a monthly basis to check on the progress of the relationship. If any situations arise where one or both participants feel that they are not getting what they need from each other, then it should be the committee's responsibility to terminate the relationship and find another suitable mentor for the mentee. In addition, the program as a whole can be tracked with anonymous questionnaires given to all participants. This provides feedback on whether the participants feel the program is beneficial to them and whether the committee is doing its part to make the program a success.

To assist employees in understanding the details of the mentoring program established in your firm, a handbook for all employees and new hires will be extremely useful. Topics to touch on in the handbook may include the following:

• *Overview of the mentoring program*

• *Role of a mentor*

- * Definition of a mentor
- * Expectations of a mentor
- * Mentoring confidentiality
- * Mentor requirements
- * Mentoring selection process

• *Role of a mentee*

- * Definition of a mentee
- * Expectations of a mentee
- * Mentee requirements
- * Choosing a mentor

• *Role of the committee*

Another aspect the committee should handle is a budget and activities for the year. Once a budget has been set, the activities can be planned. If possible, provide events where mentor and mentee can spend some one-on-one time together, such as a monthly lunch. In addition, plan a yearly or biyearly activity that all participants in the mentoring program attend. This event will not only give mentees a chance to further interact with their mentors, but will also entice others within the company to join the program.

Who Needs a Mentor

Basically, anyone can benefit from having a mentor. Engineers, technicians, and administrative staff members of all levels will reap the rewards of having some-

one they can speak to, who will guide them and help resolve their work-related daily stresses and troubles. When presenting the mentoring program to your firm, pose the following questions to your employees to help determine whether or not they would like to have a mentor:

- Would you like to advance to a new level or take on new and/or additional projects?
- Would you like to improve your technical and/or interpersonal skills?
- Do you need assistance with "soft skills" such as managing others, handling negotiations, resolving personal conflicts, or interacting with clients?
- Do you want professional development or career counseling?
- Would you like to shift your career focus to a new area?
- Would you like a better understanding of the firm's corporate culture, policies, and procedures?

What Makes a Good Mentor

Whether your program will let mentees choose their own mentor freely or select from a list of available mentors, it is important for mentors to exhibit certain characteristics that will help foster nurturing and positive relationships. Qualities to look for in potential mentors are:

- An enthusiastic attitude toward their job and the company
- Listening and motivation skills
- Strong interpersonal and communication skills
- The ability to offer positive feedback and constructive criticism to other employees

Reinforce for potential mentors the idea that they will benefit from their relationship by helping improve employees' technical and management skills and also by enjoying the satisfaction of knowing that they helped shape someone's career. In addition, mentors will gain valuable leadership and management skills that may help advance their own careers.

It is important to stress the fact that in most cases you cannot assign two employees to a mentoring relationship and expect a success to happen. Mentoring must be a natural relationship in which trust and open, honest communication are key.

✓ **Survey of CEOs states that one of the top-three factors in their career was mentoring (Source: Account Temps Survey of Fortune 500).**

✓ **On 11 Job Essential Skills, mentees increased skills by an average of 61% through a successful mentor program (Source: MMHA).**

✓ **According to ASTD, the average cost of recruiting and training a new employee is \$150,000 over three years. Mentoring programs have been proven to increase retention by 20 to 30 percent and will save companies hundreds of thousands of dollars.**

✓ **According to an Account Temps Survey in 1996 of Fortune 500 companies, 96 percent of executives said that mentoring is an important development tool.**

✓ **71 percent of Fortune 500 companies said that they use mentoring to make learning occur in their organizations. (1996)**

Expanding Your Mentoring Program

A way to expand your mentoring program is through a buddy system. The buddy system is a way for new employees to be welcomed into your firm. New employees are matched up with a peer mentor (someone who has a similar job description, if possible) to show them the ropes around the office, take them to lunch on their first day, help them get supplies, etc. This system will help new employees transition into the corporate culture faster, create a sense of belonging within the firm, and in return increase their productivity.

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The buddy system can also be used to help transfer new hires into the mentoring program. Set a time limit for which new employees are to stay in the buddy system. A good time frame is three months, or if your firm has a probationary period for new employees, set the limit to when the probationary period ends. Once a new employee has completed the buddy system, they should then be advised to select a mentor and enroll in the formal mentoring program.

CONCLUSION

Here are the major action plan steps to create a customized mentoring program for your firm:

- **Form a committee to head up the mentoring program.**
- **Plan how to administer and track the program over the long term.**
- **Develop a handbook outlining the program and its guidelines.**
- **Present an introduction to the program.**
- **Select mentor-mentee relationships.**
- **Track relationships and handle any tribulations.**
- **Hold events to keep the program exciting and attract new members.**

At the most basic level, mentoring is about advising, teaching, coaching, and providing a guidance system. At its very best, mentoring is about creating leadership and trust with benefits that last. It is proven that individuals who have mentors are more likely to be productive and will be loyal and less likely to be enticed by competitors.

A mentoring program will not only help your firm keep those employees in whom you have already invested time and training, but will help aid prospective hires to decide to come work for you. Having an official mentoring program can make a big difference in a person's decision to join a company, particularly if that person has concerns about getting lost within a large organization.

I believe strongly in the effectiveness of mentoring. I have seen it work, and I have been one of its lucky beneficiaries. Mentoring is an investment in the future – the future of your employees and the future of your firm.