Building an Effective Mentoring Program

By Lois Zachary

Organizations spend significant time, dollars and resources designing, developing and implementing mentoring programs. Too many of these programs barely get off the ground. They may rollout to great fanfare and bravado, raise levels of expectation and then go poof into the night.

On the other hand, a few mentoring programs continue to thrive and grow for many years.

The degree to which mentoring programs are successful depends on the answers to a few questions, among which are:

- Is mentoring embedded in a supportive organizational culture that values continuous learning?
- Is the organization and its leadership committed to the development of its people?
- Are management and program staff conscientious in planning, implementing and following through?
- Are the right people involved in the planning and execution of the program?

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- Does the program create a collaborative learning community?
- Are there adequate feedback mechanisms and accountability assurances in place?
- Is there a strategy for maintaining open communication ?
- Is there a climate of trust among team members?

The extent to which you have positive answers to these questions indicates the extent to which there is solid groundwork for planning an effective mentoring program.

Here is a step-by-step roadmap that briefly describes what you can do to help the organizations you work with achieve incredible results in their mentoring program planning.

1. Define the program. Defining the program purpose, scope, population, learning outcomes and benefits creates a level of readiness and a set of expectations for those involved in the planning process, for those that will be affected and involved, and even for those who are interested or invested in the outcomes of the program.

The purpose of the program must be crystal clear and the intent of the program unambiguously defined., defining the intent of the program. When that is clear, it delimits the scope and the target population, and drives definition of the learning outcomes.

Since there are many stakeholders who might benefit from a mentoring program, care must be taken to both identify them and to anticipate the benefits for each of these stakeholders as realistically as possible.

2. Identify success factors. Certain things are necessary to successfully achieve a program's intended purpose and its desired learning outcomes. It is not sufficient to merely enumerate a list of success factors. They must be clearly described and mutually understood since they define the work and what will become the basis of success measurement.

3. Articulate roles and responsibilities. One of major impediments to achieving success in a mentoring program is failure to clearly define and articulate roles and responsibilities of the various program participants. When roles are not defined or articulated, multiple (and often unrealistic) expectations by multiple players are created.

The result is chaos and confusion based on untested and often erroneous assumptions. Roles and responsibilities should be defined for those who participate in or relate to program participants regularly (HR manager, supervisor, direct report), and those who relate on an ad hoc basis (mentoring coaches, mentor managers, mentoring task force or committee members).

4. Establish mentee/mentor criteria. Identifying the target population only takes an organization so far. It is important to clarify just who is eligible to

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participate in the program. In other words, what criteria will be used as a basis for inclusion in the participant pool? Of those included in the pool, what is the ultimate basis for selection?

Establishing criteria is not an issue for organizations where everyone is expected to participate in mentoring. In most organizations, there are both eligibility and selection criteria. For example, Alpha LLC requires its mentors to be in a managerial position for two years before they are eligible to be included in the mentor pool. At Bravo Association, all new employees are automatically assigned a mentor.

"A mentoring program should be a work in progress."

5. Develop pairing protocols. Regardless of whether mentoring partners are self-selected or decided by a third party, the selection process should be proactively determined and based on "best learning fit criteria," such as experience, expertise, learning style, accessibility, etc.

If mentees and mentors are expected to self-select, guidance should be provided as to how and where to find, select and recruit an appropriate mentor. Pairing protocols include identification of who it is that does the pairing, what happens if a match doesn't work out, and a sequential project management plan detailing the process of pairing from implementation of the process to final pairing.

6. Develop accountability for managing, overseeing and coordinating the program. Probably the most overlooked part in developing a mentoring program is building a workable and adequate infrastructure to support the long-term viability and growth of the program. The implementation group may or may not involve the same individual/s that started the program.

Consider who should be responsible for program oversight, management and coordination. Some organizations use a rotating committee structure to promote ownership and investment in the program. Others use this structure as leadership development opportunity to reward and mentor their high performers.

Accountability means being answerable to someone and for something. Reporting responsibilities must be defined and roles and responsibilities clearly delineated.

7. Develop marketing and communication strategy. Individuals that are to be included and touched by the program (stakeholders) must understand the business reasons, the purpose, the intended out-

comes of the program, and what is in it for them, as well as the pragmatics of the program.

This is accomplished by marketing the program internally (to the target group) and perhaps throughout the organization or to specific others within or external to your organization. Using consistent messages to "educate for understanding" and inform those who need to know about the program (using a segmented marketing approach) ensures that the right people get the right messages at the right time.

8. Develop continuous feedback loops. Unless the development and implementation process of a mentoring program is an iterative process, it limits a program's shelf life. A mentoring program should be a work in progress. Gathering input regularly serves many different functions simultaneously. "Testing back" with key informants promotes interest and ownership, identifies potential obstacles and strengthens the program. Information gleaned from reliable feedback enables it to respond to changing conditions and circumstances in timely manner and to continuously enhance the program.

9. Ensure visible support from the top. While the responsibility for embarking on a mentoring program can be handed off, it should not be hands-off. Leaders must champion the effort and encourage others to do the same. They must talk about the value of mentoring to the future of the organization and the immediate payoffs.

This requires leaders to keep up-to-date and have current information at this disposal about the program status. They must find ways to "show up" when they can't physically be present, to share personal mentoring stories, to acknowledge mentoring success and to make it clear enough that mentoring really matters.

The revolving door of organizational leadership today makes the challenge of ensuring visible support from the top a formidable one. One CEO's priorities and commitment may not be based on the same set of assumptions as that of his or her predecessor. Visible support from the top needs to be nurtured among decision-makers and leaders who hold perceived and real power as well as the programmatic purse strings.

10. Design education and training opportunities for participants, coaches, and key support personnel. Mentoring education and training opportunities should include a continuum of multi-level learning

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experiences that meet a variety of learning and development needs.

Rather than develop a one-time "start up" training program, program developers should consider providing ongoing learning opportunities to encourage people to take the "next step" in their mentoring skills, knowledge and development.

Mentoring training and coaching should be required for key program personnel (trainers, mentoring coordinating committee members and mentoring coaches). Program content should complement and mesh with existing learning programs.

11. Develop reward, recognition and celebration plan. Organizational practice varies when it comes to reward, recognition and celebration practices. Some organizational cultures discourage individual recognition, reasoning that no one employee should be valued above another. Other cultures routinely provide monetary incentives, rewards and public recognition.

Reward, recognition and celebration offer an opportunity for further motivating, educating and nurturing commitment for the mentoring effort. At a minimum, organizations should include appropriate celebration into their mentoring calendar cycle to celebrate achievement of learning goals.

12. Create a contingency plan that addresses potential obstacles and stumbling blocks. Once the initial draft of mentoring program plan is complete, the time is ripe to consider potential obstacles and stumbling blocks. Huang and Lynch (1995) remind us, "Entertain hardships while they are still easy. Address great issues while they are small. The wise take precaution, and anticipate difficulties with and preparation. And manage to accomplish great things."

Practically speaking "entertaining hardships while they are small" usually requires some detachment, since probably everyone on the planning group is now invested in the program that has been developed. It is valuable to get feedback from the field to inform contingency planning. Walking through each participant's journey in the program (i.e., a HR person, a mentor, or a mentor coach) stimulates discussion of the puddles, the potholes, and the possible hurdles. Envisioning worst-case scenarios surfaces additional issues that may have been overlooked during the initial planning.

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13. Plan the rollout and implementation. An ideal way to rollout out a program is to run a pilot program first and use it as a learning opportunity (a learning laboratory) before fully implementing the program.

To maximize the learning, specific details of the rollout need to be spelled out well in advance. The specifics of the vision should be concrete enough that everyone involved in the program planning is clear about what to expect when the pilot is rolled out. A program is likely to be destined for failure if there is lack of clarity about the vision and/or confusion about the details.

14. Gather stories and best practices. Stories inspire. Best practices inform. One of the keys to selling, inspiring and galvanizing participation in a program is being able to relate to real life mentoring experiences of peers, colleagues and role models. Build in opportunities to gather stories and best practices.

Group settings and networking forums enable participants to realize that others share their hopes, dreams, confusions and concerns. It also sets up a learning community where participants can learn best practices from each other.

Let's step back a moment now and see how these fourteen steps fit into the planning process. Kelly Green, BigBank's director of human resources, got the idea for a mentoring program when she attended a conference in Atlanta. She realized that there were solid business reasons to bring mentoring in. For one thing, retention had been an ongoing challenge. Mentoring could be just the vehicle BigBank need to recruit, orient and retain high-quality employees.

When Kelly returned from the conference she immediately set up an exploratory meeting to discuss the feasibility of her idea, and was pleased when it was enthusiastically embraced. She quickly identified a work team and scheduled a meeting.

The first meeting focused on defining the scope and purpose of the program, and identifying outcomes and program deliverables. The budget was prepared. She explored the financial and human implications and was able to secure a five-year financial commitment to the program.

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Kelly began to plan the planning process. She was aware that planning the mentoring work would involve careful preparation, establishing a climate of trust, creating a learning community, and finding common ground, and that she and the team had much to accomplish before the planning process could begin in earnest. By using the fourteen steps as a planning tool she was able to focus the work of the team.

> *"What's the biggest obstacle you'll face? Time."*

If you are beginning a mentoring program in your organization you too may find the fourteen steps useful as step-by-step roadmap. If you are already engaged in a mentoring program, these steps may serve as a handy guide or locator map to help you determine what steps have yet to be taken and to make process improvements.

What's the biggest obstacle you'll face? Time. Perceived or actual lack of time is probably the major stumbling block in designing, developing and maintaining mentoring programs.

Planning involves an investment of time and is best done best over time to create continuity and momentum. It takes time to create readiness, provide opportunities and build support. But the benefits are worth it. You just have to take it one step at a time.

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