

Raising the Bar in a Mentoring Culture

By Lois J. Zachary

IN A TRUE MENTORING CULTURE, there's a constant emphasis on mentoring excellence, and the bar for competency and skills mastery is continuously raised. Consequently, training plays a critical role by influencing the quality of mentoring relationships.

Because mentoring training programs mirror the actual process, the impact and value of the learning depend on seven factors that are also key to mentoring. When each of those factors is in play, the learning is lasting and participant satisfaction is greater. Regardless of whether your organization is focused on a specific training event or a continuum of education, the following topics offer a framework for productive planning, implementation, and evaluation of mentoring training.

Context

Sensitivity to context—the situation, social patterns, and organizational culture—is paramount. Without it, mentoring training is often perceived as irrelevant or even useless. If dialogue and interaction is an accurate description of how internal business is conducted in an organization, your mentoring training should include similar approaches for conversation and interaction. If you distribute a truckload of material, and the cultural norm is to get information as sound bites, the precious time and money you spent on producing that material will yield little result.

How to raise the bar

- Design and deliver training and initiatives that are relevant and fit workplace culture.

Need

It's frustrating to spend money promoting learning only to discover later that it wasn't relevant or applicable. In some organizations, employees are vocal

Strive for excellence and strengthen relationships.

about asking for what they need. But in others, you must identify learning needs through more formal feedback mechanisms, such as surveys, focus groups, and structured conversations.

Needs assessment ensures training is relevant and applicable. Collecting baseline data provides a starting point for meeting individual and group needs, and it suggests approaches that can generate results. In addition, you can meet some, but not all, skill learning needs with existing education and training venues. If you are cognizant of what is available, you can avoid duplicate expenditures.

How to raise the bar

- Consider participants' felt and normative needs, not just the outwardly expressed ones.
- Customize training to ensure that examples are relevant to the needs of various groups in the organization.

Participants

Accurate knowledge about your audience helps to develop meaningful learning experiences. Understanding the adult learning market is more than identifying an individual's age and stage of development. Participants bring unique knowledge, histories, and cultural contexts, and diverse assumptions, values, and behaviors to the training session.

The participants in a mentoring culture include the individual mentoring partners as well as a variety of other learners, such as supervisors, managers, and trainers.

Although participants have many common learning needs, each requires information unique to his or her job. For example, a human resource manager may need to know how to support the mentor and mentee without compromising confidentiality.

How to raise the bar

- Be inclusive and consider the diversity of participants. Take into account learning styles, length of employment, and experience.
- View both the mentor and mentees as participants.

Facilitators

Many organizations require facilitators to have mentoring experience or intensive just-in-time training prior to any required train-the-trainer session. Others don't. But without thorough preparation, a facilitator may misinterpret—and therefore misrepresent—key mentoring concepts. For example, if a facilitator's only experience with feedback has been as a remediation tool (critical feedback), or as a means to correct behavior (for performance gaps), he may easily overlook how feedback enables a mentoring relationship. Those who lead, manage, coordinate, and facilitate organizational mentoring must be conscious of their assumptions and biases.

How to raise the bar

- Be sure that the facilitator's experience and expertise meets the needs of participants.
- Require a minimum level of mentoring competence. Mastery of the material alone isn't sufficient.

Learning process

Three learning models are particularly effective for developing and delivering mentoring training: self-directed learning, experiential learning (which includes action learning), and transformational learning.

Mentoring is the quintessential expression of self-directed learning, and its core is individual responsibility. Participants accept ownership and accountability for setting personal learning objectives, developing strategies, finding resources, and evaluating learning. In a mentoring relationship, that responsibility

ity is mutually defined and shared. The agreement, in essence, defines objectives, strategies, resources, and time and evaluation methods of the relationship.

Learning specialist David Kolb's four-phase experiential learning model focuses on how information is perceived and transformed. Although most participants have a preferred learning style, effective learning depends on an individual's ability to use each of the four styles to transform his or her learning experience.

For example, a participant is involved in a specific experience. Then, the individual reflects upon and interprets that experience, and draws conclusions that guide his or her actions. Trainers who are aware of preferred learning styles can then customize activities to specific learning needs.

In action learning, a group of people with diverse skills and experiences analyze an existing problem, determine new strategic directions, and develop an action plan. Together, they gather new insights as they reflect on lessons learned. They then apply their new learning and continue the action-reflection-action cycle, striving to continuously improve results.

Transformational learning is facilitated through a process of critical self-reflection. A cycle begins as participants become aware of their existing assumptions. That self-awareness converts into self-understanding as they begin to challenge those assumptions. The learning that results enables participants to let go of beliefs that hold them back, and transform their thinking into new, more productive action and behavior.

How to raise the bar

- Promote self-directed learning, experiential learning, action learning, and transformational learning in the training.

Setting

Setting is the space, location, or environment in which training takes place. And, it never should be left to chance. Setting influences the quality of the learning experience: It can be conducive to learning or present insurmountable roadblocks.

For example, a beautiful setting for a retreat may be a welcomed option. But, if the microphones aren't working, participants can't hear, or the room is too warm, the learning will suffer.

How to raise the bar

- Because mentoring training focuses on skill building and practice conversations, the setting must encourage discussion.

Timing

The timing of mentoring training must be both strategic and responsive, and implementation should be based on organization priorities. When too many concerns compete for time, money, and leadership, it's hard to build momentum, and the case for mentoring often falls off the radar.

Another missed opportunity is failing to deliver training when the organization and participants are ready. Mentoring is meaningless if participants aren't ready to learn.

How to raise the bar

- Be sure that the timing of mentoring education aligns with organizational priorities and readiness.

Raising the bar on an organization's mentoring program is well worth the effort. It dramatically increases the quality, impact, and value of the learning, and it requires habitual reflection on practice by practitioners. When mentoring relationships are rooted in a mentoring culture, they also enrich the quality of organizational life.

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