

# What Leaders Must Do to Ensure Mentoring Success

*Lois J. Zachary, Ed.D.*

Mentoring is an organizational practice whose time has come. In today's competitive business climate, the need for continuous learning has never been greater. At the same time, the hunger for human connection and relationships has never been more palpable. Because mentoring combines learning with the compelling human need for connection, individuals are better able to deepen their personal capacity and maintain organizational vitality in the face of continuous challenge and change.

Mentoring also is a smart way to do business. Organizations that continuously create value for mentoring achieve amazing results. They report increased retention rates, improved morale, increased organizational commitment and job satisfaction, accelerated leadership development, better succession planning, reduced stress, stronger and more cohesive

teams, and heightened individual and organizational learning.

Leaders in organizations must be involved at the beginning of mentoring efforts and must continuously sustain their involvement over the long haul. Far too often, leaders "deputize" others to carry the mentoring banner for them. While this may seem necessary to ease busy schedules, it is insufficient to generate the kind of traction needed to keep the mentoring effort flourishing.

Leaders who sit outside the day-to-day operation of organizational mentoring nevertheless have a key role to play in ensuring mentoring success. They possess the political muscle, the organizational wherewithal and the clout to make things happen. Because of their positional power, what they say and do greatly influence the success or failure of organizational mentoring.



There are eight requirements for leaders who want to ensure sustainability of mentoring within their organizations:

1. **Leaders must think more seriously and systemically about mentoring and create cultures to support and strengthen the mentoring that occurs within their organizations.** This means being more strategic about mentoring by aligning all these programs with the organization's vision and business goals. It also means building accountability into systems, maximizing communication, creating demand, promoting value visibility, offering multiple opportunities, making it available to everyone in the organization and building in safety nets to minimize stumbling blocks and address challenges.
2. **Leaders must be personally and organizationally committed to mentoring.** Leaders who demonstrate their personal commitment are better able to rally others around it. Leaders who don't support mentoring with both talk and action stifle these efforts within their organizations. When this happens, it undermines mentoring credibility and sends a message about its lack of importance to the organization. It sometimes takes years to recover from this kind of setback.
3. **Leaders must encourage and invite participation by inspiring a shared vision of what is possible through mentoring.** They must conscientiously work at engaging their people. They need to talk about how mentoring benefits the individual and the organization, as well as how it aligns with their vision and strategy. They must acknowledge and recog-



## in practice:

## Informatica: Coaching Managers

For the approximately 1,400 employees of Informatica, a leading provider of data integration products and services, finding time for learning can be tough. That's because the company operates in a "very hypercompetitive environment," according to Linda Pfeifer, director of HR global learning and performance.

"Our business is very fast paced," she said. "It's very important for our employees and managers to be up to date on the latest technologies, soft skills and leadership skills. At the same time, because everything's moving so fast, it can be hard to set aside time for training. My biggest challenge is helping busy managers carve time out of their busy schedules for learning and development. One of the ways I do that is by ensuring that the learning solutions are well aligned with the needs of the managers and the employees, as well as aligned to strategic goals."

With those kinds of performance demands, it might seem surprising that Pfeifer is so enthusiastic about mentoring and coaching initiatives, which typically require a fair amount of time and effort. But in her role, she has just launched a pilot for a mentoring program, and she also operates extensive coaching offerings for managers.

"We have a core management curriculum that all of our managers go through," she explained. "It's coach-based. It doesn't matter if they're a manager in California or Bangalore or the Netherlands — they're all going to go through the same management development experience."

Using external coaches, the program teaches managers about key knowledge and skills for their roles, such as motivational techniques and leadership practices, Pfeifer said.

"As they work with the managers, there is structure in that there are certain skills that the managers must learn and apply in their own environment. At the same time, there is a lot of flexibility, in that the manager has the freedom to determine how they're going to apply the skills, and in what context it works best. Providing structure around what the manager must learn while at the same time providing flexibility so the managers have freedom for self-direction is a powerful combination."

Another advantage of the program is that the information flows in multiple directions. Particularly, it serves as a way to gather expertise and lessons learned from Informatica's management population.

"Our coach-based management development program is set up to capture and continuously grow and pull in new best practices and learning from all our managers," Pfeifer said. "Even if I'm a manager and I'm too busy to enter the mentoring program right now, at least through our core management development curriculum, I can benefit from the lessons learned and best practices of other managers half a world away."

"What I've learned is how these programs morph. They continuously change and adapt to the new knowledge that comes into the environment. What's exciting is when these processes and skills are actually applied in the real world, we gain even more awareness and insight as to how to translate that research into effective management behavior. You only get that if you have your hand on the pulse of what's happening in the trenches."

Also, Pfeifer pointed out that mentoring and coaching programs are effective ways to capture knowledge before it leaves the organization.

"To me, the organizational learning piece is critical," she said. "When you have a top performer who's been a mentor to many people leave the company, if you haven't figured out a way of capturing their best practices and expertise to share and disseminate on a global basis, then you've missed a tremendous opportunity."

—Brian Summerfield, bsummerfield@clomedia.com

nize the importance of mentoring by making the time to talk with others about their experiences.

4. **Leaders must continuously create value for mentoring.** When leadership is not present and accounted for in the mentoring effort, people take notice. If mentoring is felt, experienced and perceived as a vested interest and a commitment of leadership, then that spirit of ownership permeates every level of the organization.
5. **Leaders must build the right infrastructure to support their mentoring efforts.** Infrastructure promotes sustainability by assuring that mentoring ownership is well-anchored within multiple layers of the organization. An organization with a mentoring-friendly infrastructure commits its leadership and time to mentoring over the long term. It also ensures that there are sufficient financial, technological, human and knowledge resources to support mentoring as it develops and expands.
6. **Leaders must proactively address the succession of mentoring leadership.** This task cannot — and should not — reside with one person. This responsibility is too important and too time-consuming to rest on only one set of shoulders. Leaders eventually move on, retire or leave. Wise leaders empower mentoring leadership to replace itself.
7. **Leaders must be role models of mentoring excellence.** Positive role models exert powerful influence. Their example extends a compelling invitation to engage in a personal odyssey, to learn their story, to follow their example and to travel alongside them. As Laurent Daloz reminds us, the mentor's gift "is not the opportunity to become like them but the challenge to become more fully ourselves through them. They call forth the best we have. They invite us to transcend ourselves."
8. **Leaders must keep abreast of progress and current developments.** Up-to-date knowledge, success stories and data points should be part of the organizational leader's communication tool kit. Holding periodic briefings to keep leaders current helps them in their efforts to maintain mentoring visibility and reinforce the value mentoring creates in an organization.

## Strategies for Success

It is clear that leaders have a key role to play in ensuring mentoring success. Here are some very specific high-leverage strategies for success that organizational leaders can adopt.



1. **Create a mentoring culture.** Shift your mentoring paradigm from merely having a program to the bolder, deeper and more comprehensive learner-centered concept of a mentoring culture. This means establishing ownership, promoting shared responsibility, maximizing resources, valuing mentoring excellence and shortening ramp-up time. A mentoring culture does this by creating readiness, providing multiple opportunities and building in support. Creating a mentoring culture begins by looking in the organizational mirror with an honest appraisal of the organization's vision, its business processes, how it treats its people and how it demonstrates its values on a daily basis.
2. **Think alignment.** Ask yourself the following questions: How does mentoring align with other similar efforts? Does mentoring in our organization align with our espoused values? Do we have a shared vision of what mentoring is or should look like in our organization? Do we actively work at creating awareness and understanding of how mentoring fits in with our strategy? Does the structure we have created to support mentoring align with our organizational practices? Do we consistently and effectively communicate up-to-date information about mentoring in general and our organizational expectations in particular?
3. **Practice accountability.** Ask yourself: Have we set goals for mentoring? Clarified expectations? Defined roles and responsibilities? Are we monitoring progress and measuring results? Do we listen and gather feedback regularly? How quickly do we integrate process improvements? How qualitatively different is our program today than it was yesterday?
4. **Raise mentoring visibility.** Add mentoring to routine meeting agendas at organization, unit and team levels. For example, a participant, coach or department head talks about how mentoring has transformed their organization. Meeting materials include an update that incorporates any or all of the following: participation data, recent successes and outcomes. Mentors and mentees share their experiences at mentoring orientation sessions. Organizational mentoring champions tell their personal mentoring story and are prepared to share other success stories. Senior leaders look for opportunities to engage employees in informal and formal conversations about mentoring.
5. **Reward, recognize and celebrate mentoring.** The practices of reward, recognition and celebration help create value and visi-

bility for individual and organizational mentoring in numerous ways. While many organizations believe that mentoring brings its own psychic rewards (personal satisfaction, meaning and contribution) others engage in a variety of reward practices and reap considerable benefit from doing so. Some say that reward is a powerful motivator for promoting accountability, because it sets a standard for excellence. Some see its virtue as an alignment tool. In addition to rewards, the organization can offer financial incentives that respect the time and effort spent on mentoring. Mentoring recognition, like mentoring reward, runs the full gamut of practice and possibility. Be alert for ways to be inclusive in recognizing people. Celebration adds value and creates visibility for mentoring excellence. Raise the bar on mentoring practice in your organization by celebrating and showcasing mentoring excellence wherever and whenever feasible and appropriate.

6. **Include mentoring competency as part and parcel of the leader's performance-development plan.** Doing so increases recognition and acceptance of the importance of mentoring and reminds employees of its importance as part of their own and others' development.
7. **Carefully select, groom and grow your future mentoring leaders.** Ensuring mentoring leadership continuity is a challenge, because the reality is that people, positions and situations change. Preparing the next generation of mentoring leaders creates long-term mentoring sustainability. Decide what competencies are required for mentoring leaders. Make sure that they are not just committed to mentoring but to the practice of mentoring excellence. Create a succession plan to build and develop them in their mentoring role.
8. **Allocate and protect mentoring time.** Realistically assess the amount of time mentoring is expected to take and encourage employees to allot ample time for mentoring. Allow time for mentoring even if it competes with project time commitments. Communicate clearly with supervisors regarding the time expectations for mentoring so they don't feel blindsided.

Leadership is indispensable to long-term mentoring success. When leaders are personally and organizationally committed to mentoring, they enlarge their own capacity to lead, support the growth and development of their people, and positively impact learning throughout the entire organization. ■

Creating a mentoring culture begins by looking in the organizational mirror with an honest appraisal of the organization's vision, its business processes, how it treats its people and how it demonstrates its values on a daily basis.

*Dr. Lois J. Zachary is president of Leadership Development Services LLC, a consulting firm based in Phoenix, Ariz. She is also the author of The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships and Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization's Guide. She can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.*