



FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Kendra had a hard time at her new job as manager of customer service at a large retail chain.

She had sought out a new job to get away from the very toxic situation in her previous workplace, where there was little communication or information sharing. At the time, she had assumed that everything that went wrong in her previous job was her fault in some way.

If, for example, someone refused to share information with her, she assumed it was because that person wanted

**INFORMAL MENTORING
IS ABOUT BEING IN
THE RIGHT PLACE AT
THE RIGHT TIME AND
FOSTERING BOUNDLESS
PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT
AND GUIDANCE WITHIN
ORGANIZATIONS.**

By Lois J. Zachary

her to fail. On top of this, she believed that anyone in a senior position was probably smarter and more competent than her. As a result, she became overly cautious and untrusting, and lost all confidence in herself.

Although the culture of her new organization was completely different from that of her last job, she was finding it hard to shake the old feelings, suspicions, and self doubt. Kendra brought the defensive and ineffective behaviors she learned at the



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old job with her to the new one, and it wasn't working for her.

Despite the fact that the new job had a culture of collaboration and openness, Kendra assumed that people were withholding information and didn't want her to succeed. Instead of trying to function effectively in her new workplace, Kendra's strategy was to focus on impressing everyone and making herself look as good as she could. To this end, she took a very top-down approach, quickly implementing a series of changes and dictating new policies. Just as quickly, she managed to alienate her colleagues and the people who reported to her.

Kendra was lucky, however, because Sandra, the HR manager at her new organization, took notice. She saw that Kendra was struggling and invited her to lunch one day to talk. She helped Kendra see exactly what she needed to do to be successful. She was able to make concrete suggestions for ways to approach meetings, influence some tough department heads, and resolve conflicts with her peers.

Kendra's story is a good example of informal mentoring. There were no structured agreements or commitments, just two people committed to learning and a mentee who was motivated and open to change. This process allowed Kendra to develop confidence and succeed during a very critical time in her career. All of this came about because Sandra approached Kendra and essentially offered to informally mentor her when she needed it most.

The nature of informal mentoring

Informal mentoring occurs every day in various settings. Most informal mentoring is anonymous and hidden in organizations, and for that reason, it is still regarded by many organizations and individuals as both less significant and less legitimate than formal mentoring. Rarely is informal mentoring embraced on an organizational level with the same enthusiasm, seriousness, and support as its more organized counterpart.

One common assumption is that employees will get the mentoring they need, when they need it. The irony is that those who need mentoring the most rarely find mentors on their own. New employees in particular, often don't know how to find the

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right mentor at the right level and don't want to be viewed as too aggressive or pushy.

Young employees struggle with finding "the perfect mentor," and as a result, may end up without any mentor. Another assumption is that because informal mentoring relationships are individualized, little external support is necessary. In practice, quite the opposite is true.

Informal mentoring relationships are usually described as unstructured, casual, and natural. Part of their special character is that there is no rule of thumb; each relationship is idiosyncratic. They

can last for a week, many months, or a lifetime. They are serendipitous, spontaneous, self-selected, and situational relationships, with each proceeding at its own pace and on its own timetable.

As we saw in the example, Kendra and Sandra were totally accountable for their own participation and were the sole determiners of frequency, duration, content, and outcomes. Their experience was fairly typical in the way that it began. Informal mentoring develops when an individual offers to give advice or guidance, or asks for advice or guidance from another.

Shades of informal mentoring

Within informal mentoring, there is considerable variation as to how relationships play out. Popular wisdom to the contrary, informal relationships run the gamut from casual, off-the-cuff conversations, to "flash mentoring" (conversations and information sharing taking place on an as-needed basis), to more structured and formalized relationships. These relationships can be further broken down to include individual peers, teams, or a personal board of directors.

Between peers. While the traditional view has evolved in practice over time, the basic configuration of the relationship remains—two learning partners engaged in a mentoring relationship with each other. A variation on this theme is peer mentoring, which occurs when two equals engage in a mentoring relationship. The individuals may be at the same level within an organization's structural hierarchy or they may hold the same title across organizations. They may also be in roughly the same age cohort.

What defines the individuals' "peer-ness" is the equality or commonality of status, experience, expertise, or interest. In some cases, each person plays two roles—mentor and mentee. In others, one peer is the established mentor and the other is the mentee.

Within groups. Group mentoring is gaining traction in many different

Breaking Down the Modes of Mentoring: Informal Versus Formal

KEY FEATURES	INFORMAL	FORMAL
Common descriptors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casual • Serendipitous • Spontaneous • Natural • Idiosyncratic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized • Structured • Facilitated • Strategic • Planned
Finding a mentoring partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No eligibility requirements • Self-initiated • Voluntary • Chemistry and accessibility are valued • Individual asks for or offers advice or guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility requirements established • Facilitated selection process • Voluntary • Learning fit and compatibility • Person who makes first contact is stipulated
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of expectation • No formal agreement • Commitment is not required • Accountability harder to maintain • Self-managed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles and responsibilities predefined • Structured/negotiated mentoring agreements • Commitment required • Mechanism for accountability built in • Program managed
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Unstructured • Evolves naturally and over time • Lack of formal commitment • Communication is sporadic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership • Structured • Milestones defined for each phase of relationship • Commitment to each other • Communication is ongoing
Learning goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad goals • Goals tend to change/evolve over time • Just-in-time goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad generalized goals become more specific and focused • Goals are evaluated regularly • Development goals
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No training required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be training sessions for mentors or mentees individually, as groups, or in combined sessions
Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No expectation as to relationship time frame • Relationships are organized around immediacy of need • Relationships can go on indefinitely or be purely situational 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship is finite; usually has a defined beginning and ending point • Relationship organized around time frame or completion of learning goals • Relationships are often renegotiated
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No formal mechanism • Goal achievement is ad hoc • No required reporting to a third party 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal mechanism • Relationship progresses toward goal; achievement is measured regularly • Required reporting on a programmatic basis

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configurations. A peer mentoring group is composed of peers with similar learning interests or needs. The group is self-directed and self-managed. It takes responsibility for managing the learning process so that each member's learning needs are met and group members derive maximum benefit from members' knowledge, expertise, and experience.

An example of this is executive peer mentoring. This form can provide a sounding board for people at their own level, and of their own gender or background, to test ideas and provide a safe haven for preparing for significant personal and organizational transitions.

Another form of peer group mentoring, the mentoring circle, allows each person to tap into the collective wisdom of the group and cull needed expertise and experience to solve problems, improve practice, or advance personal effectiveness.

Personal board of directors. An emerging and increasingly popular variety of informal mentoring is the personal board of directors. In this model, the mentee seeks out and recruits multiple mentors to help solve problems, act as a sounding board, or challenge his thinking. The "board" may come together in the same time and space with the mentee, or the mentee may choose to meet with them independently.

Getting organizations on board

Today's organizations need to support and pay attention to informal as well as formal mentoring taking place among their employees. Raising the bar on informal mentoring enriches all the mentoring that goes on within the organization. There are many options to consider for enhancing and supporting informal mentoring.

Regardless of the route you choose, a serious and systematic effort is required to create value for informal mentoring. What is your action plan for supporting informal mentoring in your organization? Options to consider include

- offering guidance, strategies, and coaching for finding a mentoring partner, including specifics on what to look for, steps for selecting a mentor (for instance, how to scope out possibilities, narrow

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down choices, and make the approach), and how to get started on the right foot

- providing mentoring education and training
- making opportunities for those engaged in informal mentoring to share best practices with each other
- encouraging participation in skill-building sessions
- supplying information about how informal mentoring works and what to expect
- furnishing an informal mentoring toolkit that includes step-by-step guidelines, tips, and related articles

- presenting lunch-and-learn sessions to individuals interested specifically in informal mentoring
- holding networking forums to encourage individuals to find informal mentoring partners
- making informal mentoring coaching drop-in sessions available for mentors and mentees
- developing tip sheets that explain how to recognize signals for closure or acknowledge that the relationship is reaching the end of its usefulness
- offering guidelines on how to close out the mentoring relationship
- building a community bulletin board or website where individuals who are seeking mentors or offering to be mentors can post their names and information about what they are looking for or offering to provide.

Organizations that consciously encourage and support informal mentoring enhance its quality and boost the standard of practice for mentoring for everyone within the organization.

Learning and development professionals have a key role to play in ensuring the success of mentoring. To keep it flourishing, they must be involved in promoting readiness for mentoring within their organizations, creating multiple mentoring opportunities, and building ongoing support for mentors and mentees. **T+D**

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