

## **Play “20 Questions” to Develop a Successful Mentoring Program**

**Judith G. Lindenberger and Lois J. Zachary**



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# Play "20 Questions" to Develop a Successful Mentoring Program



By Judith G. Lindenberger and Lois J. Zachary

**W**hy do some organizations achieve great success in rolling out a mentoring program, while others achieve only a modicum of success?

We believe that the companies that are most successful view corporate mentoring as an organic process, meaning that they understand that mentoring programs evolve and grow. Our experience demonstrates that the difference between mentoring success and failure lies in the ability to build capacity and integrate learning continuously.

In order to create a successful mentoring program, you should answer 20 questions. We've included dos and don'ts for each, based on research and our experience in developing a mentoring program at Brown-Forman Corporation.

**1. What are our business reasons for**

**developing a mentoring program?**

You should develop a mentoring program if and when you have solid business reasons, such as to speed up the development of future leaders or to share organizational knowledge.

Do

□ your homework. Look at employee retention rates, the percentage of senior managers who will reach retirement in the next five to 10 years, current bench strength, and development objectives.

Don't

□ develop a mentoring program because it's popular or because you've read that it works for other companies.

**2. What organizational support exists and what needs to be developed?**

Successful mentoring initiatives require visible support and involvement from the highest levels of the organization.

Do

□ develop a mentoring program when

senior leadership at your company supports it and because mentoring supports your company's values and goals.

Don't

□ develop a mentoring program if you don't have the support of the highest levels or if mentoring isn't valued.

**3. What are our criteria for success?**

Do

□ set long-term goals that will help your company, such as making your organization a better place to work, increasing productivity, making people more savvy about managing their careers, connecting people, increasing diversity, and building trust and communications.

Don't

□ develop a mentoring program without setting goals.

**4. Who needs to be involved in developing our program?**

Create an advisory team of employees who represent a cross-section of the company in age, gender, roles, departments, views, and values.

Do

□ give everyone on the team an equal say and an equal vote.

□ make certain that each member is committed to the project—not just assigned to it.

Don't

□ attempt to develop a mentoring program by yourself.

**5. Who's going to manage, coordinate, and oversee the program?**

Assign someone to be the dedicated point person and mentoring coordinator to keep progress going between team meetings. The mentoring coordinator should manage the marketing plan, coach and train mentoring partners, see that the program is evaluated, and make continuous improvements to the program.

Do

□ use team members to help develop the program, to champion the program, and to evaluate progress.

Don't

□ expect team members to share the workload equally.

**6. Who else needs to be consulted? What other information do we need?**

Do

□ benchmark the practices of other successful mentoring programs.

□ schedule time for advisory team members to discuss books and articles about mentoring and to learn about cutting-edge programs at other companies.

□ consider the limited use of outside consultants to advise and provide feedback to the team. Choose your consultant carefully. Select someone who has more expertise than your team members and who will guide you in designing a mentoring program that fits your company's culture.

Don't

□ develop a mentoring program that relies solely on internal resources.

### 7. What mentoring is already in place?

Do

□ build a program that supports the informal mentoring relationships that are already going on. "If nothing else," says one senior executive at Brown-Forman, "the mentoring program has given credence and legitimacy to mentoring. People in the company know that mentoring is authorized and encouraged."

Don't

□ expect your mentoring program to replace the informal mentoring that is already going on.

### 8. How will we communicate to employees about the mentoring program?

Do

□ publicize the program in a variety of forms and forums. Develop a strategic internal marketing plan just as if you had a new product to introduce into the marketplace. Schedule mentoring briefings for each department within your company, kicked off by the department's senior operating officer. If you have multiple locations, make sure that mentoring briefings are held at each location and that they're open to all employees.

□ use the mentoring briefings to introduce your mentoring program, explain the benefits, and tell employees how they can get involved.

□ enlist many program champions. Ask senior staff to designate mentoring facilitators. Prepare the facilitators to answer questions about the mentoring program, steer interested people to the mentoring program coordinator, and broker mentoring partnerships.

□ provide training and recognition for the mentoring facilitators. Ask senior ex-



ecutives to promote mentoring in company speeches, and provide them with materials to make advocacy easy. Write articles about success stories for internal publications.

□ create written questions and answers to explain the mentoring program, how to get involved, how to set goals, what the phases of a mentoring relationship are, and strategies for success.

□ create mentoring resource centers that contain information on the program.

Don't

□ expect employees to flock to the program without an aggressive marketing plan.

### 9. How quickly do we want to roll out our program?

Do

□ start with a small number and increase your program slowly.

□ start with those locations or sites where you expect the most support and participation. Be careful in the beginning; a false start can decimate even the best-planned mentoring program. Once things are rolling smoothly, schedule additional briefings and include mentoring briefings in new-employee orientation programs.

Don't

□ attempt to get everyone enrolled and involved right away.

**10. How will we pair mentors and proteges?** The answer to this depends on the goals of your program. Our experience at Brown-Forman shows that self-initiated pairings between employees from all levels and divisions works best. We found that mentoring relationships work best if they are voluntary and confidential.

Do

□ ask employees to get input from trusted managers, co-workers, and other key individuals before entering into a mentoring partnership. Mentoring partnerships should be natural and comfortable.

□ develop simple mentor and protégé bio sheets, with photos, so that prospective pairs can learn more about each other's career history and personal data.

□ broker relationships.

Don't

□ try to "arrange marriages" or mandate partnerships.

**11. How will we motivate our employees to participate?** People at Brown-Forman often express their desire to have a mentor for one of these reasons: *I want career direction. I want to learn about other areas of the organization. I want feedback on how I'm perceived and what I can do to become more successful or I want to become more politically savvy.*

Do

□ encourage employees to get in touch with their motivations. They will be better satisfied if they have consciously identified those motivations.

Don't

□ sanctify relationships based on the wrong reasons, such as a protégé wanting to work in a mentor's division or use the mentoring relationship to complain about others in the mentor's department.

□ pair mentors with protégés who are in their chain of command, particularly if you suspect a hidden agenda.

### 12. Why would a mentor say no?

Participation should be voluntary. People who choose not to participate in a mentoring relationship may feel that they don't have the time, that they can't provide the tutelage a protégé desires, or that a protégé has chosen the mentor for the wrong reasons. Voluntary participation by mentors contributes to the success of the program.

Don't

□ enlist mentees who don't fully understand and accept the commitment required to be a mentor.

### 13. Are there pairings we should avoid?

Do

□ carefully screen protégés and mentors to assess their level of interest and commitment.

□ be honest with protégés and mentors about the time and energy required for a successful mentoring partnership.

□ pair protégés with mentors who can and want to help them reach their learning goals. And having chemistry between mentors and protégés doesn't hurt.

Don't

□ develop a program that mandates relationships or that is limited to certain employees, such as high potentials.

**14. What tips and guidance should we give mentoring partners?** Establishing clear learning outcomes for the

relationship early on has a direct effect on its ultimate success.

Do

- provide training and coaching to both partners about creating specific and appropriate learning goals.

- provide training and coaching about building trust, communicating, and defining the roles and responsibilities of both partners. At appropriate times, provide coaching and training on initiating a relationship, negotiating a relationship, learning from the relationship, and closure.

Don't

- expect people to know how to mentor and be mentored—even senior executives who have had significant mentors in their lives.

- advise mentoring partners to begin a relationship until they've established specific and mutually agreed-upon goals and outcomes.

### 15. What ongoing support should we make available to mentoring partners?

Do

- provide ongoing support to people involved in the mentoring process.

There are many ways to provide support. At Brown-Forman, we hold quarterly mentoring briefings to introduce the mentoring program to new employees. The mentoring coordinator is available for advice and counsel; 24 mentoring facilitators companywide are available to answer questions about the program. We provide opportunities for individualized consultation with the external mentoring consultant, and we conduct training programs for mentors and protégés. We currently have 13 mentoring resource centers that have written information on our mentoring program, and we include mentoring success stories in internal publications. For a successful mentoring program, support must be available at all times and in many venues.

Don't

- leave mentoring partners out in the cold after they begin a relationship.

**16. How often should we ask mentoring partners to meet?** Successful mentoring relationships are nurtured and planned. We encourage mentoring partners to meet face-to-face and connect via the telephone or email once a month at a minimum.

Do

- recommend that mentoring partners plan at least one event outside of the of-



fice during their mentoring partnership—attending a strategy meeting, watching a presentation, going on a sales call, playing golf, or going to the mentor's house for dinner.

Don't

- let more than three or four weeks go by without contact between mentoring partners, or the relationship may falter.

**17. What should we do to support long-distance mentoring?** Long-distance mentoring is fast becoming the rule rather than the exception in global corporations. As more venues for communication become available, there are increasing options for maintaining contact. You can help mentoring partners use those options effectively.

Do

- offer tips and strategies such as planning telephone meetings, talking via email, and scheduling extra time when visiting each other's locations for other business.

- encourage long-distance mentoring partners to be creative about making it work.

We have developed an extensive set of written materials to support long-distance mentoring. We also feature success stories from long-distance mentoring partners in our internal publications.

Don't

- assume that distance will kill a relationship. However, a change of location can be an occasion to review and renegotiate the communication pattern of the relationship.

**18. How many mentors should we encourage employees to have?** Mentoring cannot be all things to all people. One person can't possibly have the time or skills to provide all of the information, advice, and experience a protégé will need to grow and develop to his or her highest potential.

Do

- encourage protégés to build their own personal "board of directors" to help them further their career growth and learning.

Don't

- expect or encourage one mentor to do it all or be it all.

**19. What mechanisms can be used to improve the program continuously?** A mentoring program needs to be constantly nourished, or it will wither and die.

Do

- make continuous improvements to your program based on what you learn along the way.

At Brown-Forman, we send confidential surveys to mentoring partners on a yearly basis to assess the effectiveness of the program. We also employ an outside consultant to conduct confidential exit interviews when mentoring partnerships are concluded. We use that data to make continuous improvements to the program.

Don't

- rest on your laurels.

**20. What pitfalls do we need to avoid?** The most successful mentoring programs become a seamless part of a corporate learning culture. They are natural, supported, valued, and desired.

Do

- create a mentoring program that is customized to your organization's culture and industry.

Don't

- attempt to implement all of these ideas in your company unless they fit your culture. With the right vision and plan, your organization can be on its way to a program that works. Mentoring within an organization is best grounded within the reality of that existing culture. By incorporating some of these lessons from the field into your company's plan, you can develop a successful mentoring program for your organization.

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