Mentoring Matters

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In this month of ghosts, goblins and witches, we don't want to scare you, but not every mentoring relationship goes smoothly. Only by establishing clear strategies and mutual agreements will mentoring partners avert mentoring derailment. In this issue, we zero in on some common obstacles that tend to upend mentoring relationships and offer proven ways to prevent problems.

1. Lack of Trust

Trust is the glue that strengthens connection, eases tension and deepens a mentoring relationship. Mentoring partnerships grounded in trust grow and thrive. When trust isn't established early on, interaction stays superficial and inauthentic.   Not surprisingly, relationships that lack trust usually fizzle out.

Strategy for building trust: Start by getting to know your mentee. Don't rush. Take the time to build rapport first before you dive into the work of mentoring. Create openness right at your first meeting with some thoughtfully prepared questions that invite your mentee to talk about herself. Examples might be: What drew you to this field? What do you like about what you are currently doing? What is your strongest attribute? What does your team like best about you?

2. Breach of Confidentiality.

Even one breach of confidentiality can easily upend your relationship by undermining trust and respect. Your mentee will only become comfortable if and when he knows that what he shares with you won't get back to his boss or negatively impact his career.

Strategy for ensuring confidentiality: Don't assume that you and your mentee understand confidentiality in the same way. Early on, discuss the importance of confidentiality, and come to consensus about what confidentiality means in your mentoring relationship. Make sure you honor your agreements; it is easy to get sidetracked by an impromptu interaction with your mentee's supervisor who casually asks you how it's going. If you do accidentally breach confidentiality, be open and honest about it. Even if your mentee

compromises confidentiality, it doesn't have to be fatal. If you still believe in your mentee's potential, reframe the situation as a development opportunity and talk about its implications.

3. Lack of Time

Shortage of time is a fact of life. No one has enough time these days. However, once you make a commitment to your mentee, you need to make the time to create a meaningful experience. Mentees take it personally when meetings are cancelled or allotted time is shortened.

Strategy for managing time: Good planning helps manage time. Create agendas in advance of each meeting with your mentee so you stay on track and address important issues. Allocate time for relationship building, catching up, and progress on goals. Regularly evaluate how you've used your time. At the end of each meeting, ask, "Did we use our time well? What do we need to spend more time on? Less time on?"

4. Untested Assumptions

Assumptions are good predictors of behavior. Since we act on our assumptions whether valid or not, it is important to check them out. What if your mentee assumes that you will help him get promoted? What if your assumption is that your mentee has no experience and needs to rely on what you know? Whether valid or not, you might be inclined to give answers to your mentee and tell your mentee what to do instead of asking and exploring together. So, it is easy to understand how untested assumptions can quickly derail a mentoring relationship.

Strategy for testing assumptions: Check out the validity and accuracy of your assumptions before you act on them. Simply ask your mentoring partner directly, "I want to check out my assumption about..... Is it correct? Is there anything I am missing?

5. Fuzzy Goals

Clearly articulated learning goals are essential if mentoring to produce any growth and development for your mentee. If goals are fuzzy, outcomes will be as well and neither you nor your mentoring partner will be satisfied with the results. Even though goal setting takes time, it is well worth the effort. Articulating and agreeing on goals provides a focus for the relationship and a benchmark. Progress on goals creates energy, momentum and satisfaction.

Strategy for clarifying goals: Take the time to clarify learning goals with good conversation. Make sure you and your mentoring partner understand, define and agree to the learning goals of the mentoring relationship. Resist the temptation to pick easy goals that the mentee can achieve without much effort and time. Ask the question, "How will your learning goals contribute to your growth and development?" Establish objective measures and milestones to gauge progress and success.

6. Overstepping Boundaries

Mentors sometimes overstep boundaries. They might intercede with a supervisor or employee. They might inadvertently provide advice that is more suited for a counselor. Mentees can develop an over-dependence on their mentor, and expect more than their mentors are able or willing to deliver. When boundaries are crossed, the ripple effect impacts both the learning and the relationship.

Strategy for staying within boundaries: You will be better prepared to deal with this issue if you and your mentoring partner candidly discuss boundaries and limitations early in the relationship. Make sure mentees know what you can or are willing to do. Establish a plan for dealing with issues if they arise.

7. Lack of follow through and accountability

Mentors and mentees start off with good intentions of following through on their commitments. However, good intentions do not always translate into action and, as a result, mentoring partners may find themselves dissatisfied. Mutual accountability is essential and the best way to ensure follow-through.

Strategy for ensuring follow through and accountability: First, assume good intention; it will keep your relationship strong. At the beginning and end of mentoring meetings check-in on follow-up items. Be frank in feedback if you feel your mentee has dropped the ball. Create an action plan with completion deadlines. Start early with a discussion about how to ensure accountability for agreements. Then, hold accountability check-in conversations regularly.

8. The Fizzle Syndrome

When mentoring is reduced to three 'how's-it-going' cups of coffee, it becomes more of a social activity and is likely to fizzle out. Good mentoring strives for a balance between the building and strengthening the relationship and facilitating learning. Both require attention throughout the relationship. When the relationship thrives and the learning is making a difference, the experience can be transforming.

Strategy to prevent fizzling: Block out advance dates on your calendar for mentoring. Meeting regularly demonstrates mutual commitment. When you do meet, make sure you are engaged in meaningful conversation. Conversation creates forward momentum. Think about the mentoring conversations you've had. Are they good conversations or are you engaging in monologue? Transacting business? Could you be doing more? A good work plan will keep you on course. Identify milestone markers to assist you in gauging your progress and staying focused on your goals.

Bottom Line: Acknowledge lurking dangers and potential obstacles. Deal with them as they happen - immediately. Following these strategies will prevent the ghosts, witches and goblins from casting their spell on your mentoring relationship.

A Note to Our Readers:

We believe that leaders cannot be effective without a strong and ongoing commitment to mentoring excellence. This belief, our passion for mentoring excellence, and our extensive experience in the field with organizations led us to create the Center for Mentoring Excellence.

At our virtual center, www.centerformentoringexcellence.com, you will find mentoring tools and resources, expert advice and a forum for sharing best mentoring practices. We hope that you will visit us there and let us know how we can continue to help you raise the bar on mentoring in your organization.