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Coaching and Mentoring

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Today over half of the Fortune 500 Corporations offer their top and promising managers some form of performance coaching. What is coaching? Mentoring? Why are these companies investing huge sums in performance enhancement? What does it mean for your company?

The purpose of mentoring and coaching is to keep and improve your best people. As this is written, the national unemployment rate in the U. S. is 4.3%. Replacing a middle level manager will cost you, in direct and indirect costs, up to a full year's salary for the person being replaced. A mentor in the company can promote the kind of loyalty that we seldom see in this "generation x" environment of gypsy workers.

The term "mentor" comes from the Iliad. During the war with Troy, Odysseus entrusted his friend, Mentor, with his son, Telemachus, while he fought in the war. Since then the mentor has come to mean someone who helps a younger person learn skills and values needed to succeed. The value of a modern mentor includes helping the person learn how to work within the informal organization, how to negotiate politically dangerous situations, and how to network. The mentor opens doors that the mentee could never have opened.

Coaching? Mentoring?

Coaching and mentoring are often linked together, as if they were the same thing. They are not. Consider the analogy of the team. A coach provides specific suggestions about improving your performance, he or she usually is outside the team proper. The coach helps you play the game but is not in the game.

But a mentor is someone in the game who helps you expand your skills. Suppose you are a second string pitcher on the company baseball team. The coach motivates you to perform better, play smarter, and gives your pointers to tune your skills. The mentor is generally a senior member of the team who gives you pointers and tips on advancing in the profession or on the team. A mentor generally has some power in the system, and can sponsor the mentee into opportunities within the system. While a mentor may do a good deal of coaching, he or she will also sponsor, introduce, help networking, and give political pointers. The mentor is preparing the mentee for moves to higher levels.

And there is the dilemma about mentors: The mentee is moving up. When mentorship is a required role in organizations, it is sometimes assumed that the mentor should be one level above the mentee. A moment of reflection illuminates the innate conflict. The mentee is a potential

competitor for the immediate supervisor's position. It is in the selfish best interest of the supervisor to keep subordinates from achieving too well, lest the supervisor be replaced by that subordinate.

So it is evident that an effective mentor is at least two levels removed from the mentee. The greater the separation the greater potential for help to the mentee. An effective mentor - mentee relationship has enough separation that the mentor will not feel threatened by strong progress by the mentee. Indeed, the ideal mentor is like a parent, proud and please with the strength shown.

Spontaneous and Policy-driven Mentoring

Many organizations have a policy of creating mentor-mentee relationships for their promising young executives. As I pointed out, asking supervisors to mentor their direct reports is a conflict of interest. It is impractical to mandate any greater mentoring separation than two levels, so the policy should be to promote mentoring at a level below the direct reports. Programmed or policy-based mentoring can be very helpful especially with new hires. If the manager one level above the new hire's supervisor mentors the new person, there is a great increase in retention, loyalty and satisfaction with the work.

Spontaneous mentoring is more powerful and depends on the ability of your top executives to listen, watch, and commit. Consultant Allen Weiss tells of a CEO who complained that his executives wouldn't level with him. Weiss pointed out that they were having lunch in the executive dining room while downstairs a thousand employees were eating who knew exactly what the CEO needed to know. The CEO looked at him and replied, "What's your point?"

Organizations with spontaneous mentoring have a culture that values listening and sponsoring talented people. How much of that kind of listening and observing goes on in your company?

Finding Your Mentor

If you are serious about moving up in your career, a mentor is a vital resource. You should pay great attention to potential mentors. You are looking for someone at least two levels above you who is bright, generous, and committed to the welfare of the company. You want someone who seems to have the time or energy to help you with your career.

Once you have located a mentor, reflect on how it will be in the mentor's best interest to help you. What can you offer the mentor? How can you help? What can you do in the organization that will benefit the potential mentor and thus attract the attention you need? Finding a mentor may be almost as important as finding a spouse, and you should ponder the wisdom of the old saying, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." Linking yourself to someone who is in decline or on the outside of the power circles is worse than going it alone. Work thoughtfully yet energetically to find your mentor.

Coaching

I am a great proponent of coaching. Coaches are sometimes internal and work for the organization; sometimes (more often) they are external and are generally paid for by the organization, less frequently by the student. Much informal coaching goes on all the time in organizations, and is very helpful. The type of coaching I am discussing here is a more long-term, intense relationship where you are developing your talents, learning to motivate yourself to higher levels of perfor-

mance, and working out problem behaviors that could hurt your career.

My opinion is that coaches should be external. The kind of honesty and frankness needed for the optimal coaching relationship can be dangerous without total confidentiality. Only when there is absolute confidence that the coach will never be competing with the student for the same position will coaching work.

Does coaching help? The actual research is vague on this, and often organizations are spending millions of dollars a year on coaching but they are not tracking results. If your company does have a coaching program, there should be tracking of results and some kind of ROI should be computed. Subjectively I am very positive. I have seen it make a great difference in the lives of executives. There are two types of referrals that yield good results.

First, a strong, talented executive is interested in improving her or his decision-making, teamwork skills, or other proficiency. Like Sammy Sosa working with a batting coach, we can always increase talents. People like this are wonderful to coach. They follow through, work hard, and genuinely rejoice in the results.

The second positive coaching relationship is with someone who is in some kind of trouble at work but wants to salvage the situation and learn what to do. Again we see great results from this situation. One of the most common for me is a person who moves from a technical position, such as an engineer, into a supervisory role and doesn't have the people skills to make that work.

But occasionally I have been referred someone who is not performing and does not want to change. These folks are what we call "complainants." They believe the problems they have are due to other people, outside situations, and that they are misunderstood and misused. These folks are impossible to work with, and you are best off separating them from the company. I have sometimes been able to help a company where there is a valued but underperforming "complainant." I do this by meeting with the work team and helping the team find ways to use the complainant's skills and not become engaged and involved with the blame game.

One-on-one coaching is a waste of time, but consultation with the team can be very useful. It is to your advantage to know the difference between mentoring and coaching. Both can return powerful dividends, and both are vital tools for improving performance, loyalty, and retention in your most talented people.