BUILDING SELF-CONFIDENCE AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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In 2015 we analysed data from nearly 600 mentees who were asked to identify the top competencies sought from a mentor in order to meet their own development needs. Mentees' self-identified top five development needs were: developing career plans; developing self-confidence; working toward career objectives; decision making and problem analysis and problem solving.

Greater self-confidence was nominated by one-third of respondents. Self-confidence is not only important to the individual, but to the organisation. A self-confident individual knows his or her own value and is better able to articulate it. This obviously benefits the individual, but it also helps the organisation to capitalise on that individual's strengths. A self-confident employee is likely to run more successful meetings, operate with greater autonomy and step up to a leadership position when needed.

One might argue that self-confidence can only be gained through experience and maturity. Mentoring programs most certainly assist in developing self-confidence in both mentors and mentees. When we conduct surveys on completion and even one-year post completion of a mentoring program, increased self-confidence is invariably cited as a key benefit of the program, whether or not it was a goal at the outset.

Mentees derive confidence from being supported in a mentoring relationship, while mentors gain confidence by having a mentee look to them as a role model.

Critical thinking skills are needed

The fourth and fifth ranked development needs, decision-making and problem solving, are basic, core, critical thinking skills. Interestingly, these skills as inexorably linked to self-confidence.

Without self-confidence in general, can you trust your own decisions and solutions? If you don't trust your own decision-making and problem-solving skills how can you feel self-confident? If you lack sound decision-making and problem-solving skills your self-assuredness becomes cockiness – a hazard rather than a benefit for organisations.

These basic skills do not always make it onto management or leadership training courses. Critical thinking skills can be learned but it takes some skill to teach them. It is actually a big ask for mentors to be entrusted with developing decision-making and problem-solving skills in their mentees. It is one thing to provide career guidance and open doors to networks, it is another altogether for a manager not normally accountable for learning and development to be expected to role model or teach decision-making and problem-solving skills, or even know where to refer the mentee for such training.

Opportunities to learn critical thinking

For professional mentoring program designers, a key take away is the need to design training and resources for mentors that helps them to provide the self-confidence and skills training that mentees need.

Skilled mentors listen, ask good questions, encourage and give constructive feedback, all of which lends itself to building self-confidence in their mentee. Good mentors ask the kinds of questions that stimulate critical thinking and this could build critical thinking capacity in their mentees. However, most mentors and mentees need assistance so there is also room for us to supplement our training with specific support for testing and improving mentee's decision-making and problem-solving skills.

For organisations, it is time to start tackling these issues from an overall learning and development perspective. Mentoring programs have already proven effective in fostering self-confidence. Perhaps it is also time to go back to basics and offer training for core skills like decision-making and problem-solving at a number of levels within the organisation.

Organisations also need to consider the role of the line manager in building self-confidence and core skills. It is time to consider how to upskill managers to coach and give better quality feedback to build self-awareness and confidence in their direct reports.

Building self-confidence, and the key skills needed to foster self-confidence, should be considered a priority in organisational learning and development. Mentoring programs have an important role to play in nurturing and building organisational confidence. What other tools and resources can learning and development professionals employ to build core skills and self-confidence?

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