

THE VIEW FROM HERE

It's time businesses woke up to the myriad benefits of mentoring

We've all faced situations at work where we feel powerless, where we aren't confident or knowledgeable enough to make a decision, or could just benefit from some sage advice. You might know just where to turn when faced with such a quandary. But if you don't, the answer could be sitting just across the room.

Mentoring is best defined as a 'helping relationship' between someone with greater skills and experience and someone at an earlier stage of their career. This suggests a straightforward transaction, perhaps, but in its more 'developmental' form, mentoring benefits the mentor too, opening their eyes to new perspectives as well as creating opportunities and transferring knowledge to the mentee.

In many organisations, mentoring happens spontaneously and naturally, with senior staff going out of their way to help and encourage others. Elsewhere, however, formal mentoring relationships, introduced and facilitated by HR

professionals or external experts, can be transformational for individuals and, in time, for organisational culture.

Overall, across Asian businesses, the concept of mentoring still isn't particularly well understood. But that is changing – I am seeing a huge uplift in enquiries on the topic, not just because mentoring can be a lot more cost-effective than either coaching or full-blown leadership development programmes, but also because it connects people with others who have trodden the same path and can offer genuine advice born from hard-worn experience. That is a powerful tool, and it's no surprise that mentoring, when introduced and managed properly, has a profound impact on retention rates.

Still, there are a lot of misconceptions out there. One of the biggest is that mentoring is about helping someone find a better job, or transferring purely technical knowledge. At Art of Mentoring, we conducted research with

mentees and found that, while they were looking for career planning and guidance, self-confidence, problem-solving and decision-making were also high on the agenda – all of them areas conventional learning interventions rarely touch.

There's also a belief that any experienced manager will make a good mentor. But some leaders may feel they have nothing more to learn themselves, which makes it almost impossible for them to enjoy a mutual relationship with a mentee. Good mentors have an open mindset and are lifelong learners.

Personality is another area to watch out for. People often think they ought to be matched with a mentor they will get on with, but do you really want to work with someone just like you? The most profound mentoring relationships tend to form between those who didn't initially get on but developed a mutual respect over time.

Mentoring is what you make it, and there are relatively few rules involved. It doesn't have to be face to face – some of the most effective mentoring I have witnessed involved women in Australia's mining industry, who were working in remote locations but used phone calls and Skype to develop – and it doesn't have to be kept solely in-house when some of the most knowledgeable and helpful mentors probably lie outside your organisation or even your industry.

The only thing you can guarantee about mentoring, in fact, is that it will become more important. Employees are becoming increasingly self-directed in their learning, while many of us face a future working outside conventional employment relationships. In both cases, mentoring can ensure we're never alone.



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