

## **Mentoring: The Art of Building Organizational Capacity**

**“Those who have torches will pass them onto others”**

### **THE SANAGHAN GROUP**

Mentoring is a personal and professional relationship where an experienced individual or leader helps another person in developing their skills and knowledge.

A great deal of “informal” mentoring takes place in many institutions. With informal mentoring there are several inherent challenges:

- People who tend to be assertive ask someone they like and respect to mentor them. Mentors appreciate the “gumption” it takes to ask for assistance and often agree. (What do we do with quiet and shy individuals?)
- Mentors usually say yes because they like the mentee. We talked earlier about the danger of “comfortable cloning” where we often mentor people similar to us
- Too often, the “old boy/girl” network drives the informal mentoring because someone is fortunate enough to be connected to the mentor through family ties, alumni connections or where they went to school. It can become a self-perpetuating process that relies on who the mentee knows versus the best candidates for mentoring.

All of this is well-intentioned but can limit the powerful impact formal mentoring can have.

We believe that a carefully crafted and well-organized “official” mentoring program needs to be established throughout the campus. This program should be research based and sanctioned by the president and senior team. If at all possible, members of the senior team should act as mentors; which helps ensure credibility and importance. It also sends a strong message that developing leaders is an institutional priority and value.

Brenner (2008) discusses some core mentoring competencies which are:

- 1) being an effective listener,
- 2) a proactive coach,
- 3) a challenger of ideas,
- 4) a cheerleader, and
- 5) a skillful teacher of organizational wisdom.

A mentor’s work is not for the faint hearted.

## Some of the Roles

- **Networking:** One of the many gifts a mentor can give a mentee is access to their political and relational networks. A mentor will have made many connections throughout the organization and can make the right connections for the mentee. Political contacts can take years to build. A mentee can leverage their time and energy by gaining entry into an established network.
- **Teaching:** Teaching is one of the essential roles of mentors. Ideally, they know a great deal about how the organization really works, the historical complexities that shape organizational norms and culture and the formal networks that get the real work done in an organization. Sharing this information carefully and strategically with the mentee leverages their learning curve in dramatic ways.
- **Nurturer:** The mentor must be able to create a safe intellectual and emotional learning environment for the mentee. The mentee will come to the table with questions, doubts and maybe even some fears. The mentor must be supportive with their feedback, encourage the asking of tough questions, solicit the mentee's ideas and be a positive, not naïve cheerleader.
- **Challenger:** The mentor also needs to constructively challenge the mentee's thinking and ideas. As the mentee shares what they are currently working on, or shares a problem or challenge they are experiencing, the mentor must gently probe their thinking. Their goal is to provide insight, perspective and strategic thinking for the mentee.

The mentor also needs to share how they would address or tackle a certain problem and show the mentee how they think about things. This should only be done after the mentee has shared their thinking in order for the mentor to judge the thinking skills and openness of the mentee.

The following information highlights some "lessons learned" about mentoring as well as the roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees.

## Lessons/Advice

The relationship match is "the" key factor in the mentor/mentee relationship. Good intentions and nice people will not matter unless the personal connection between the two individuals works. Care and attention needs to be invested in selecting the right pairs.

*(We mentioned earlier that the University of Pennsylvania mentoring program utilizes a questionnaire, a career coach and the executive director of learning to match their mentors and mentees)*

Offer training, information and support with the mentor/mentee relationship building. Don't assume that once the selection process is over, everything will somehow work out. Suggest articles and books to read about mentoring. Conduct an orientation session that reviews best practices, identifies challenges and effective protocols to follow.

A great place to start is having both parties read the short and wonderful monograph *Mentoring: Two Voices* by Max DePree and Walter C. Wright, Jr. and discuss their reactions to it. It can help start a meaningful dialogue at the very beginning of the relationship.

*(A helpful resource is the web page [www.mentoringgroup.com](http://www.mentoringgroup.com). It has lots of great advice about establishing a mentor program.)*

Periodically convene the mentors as a group to discuss how things are going with their relationship, the challenges they are having and progress they are experiencing. A carefully crafted discussion can reveal what emerging leaders might need in the way of future training, development and support. You can also do the same things with mentees to see how they are experiencing the process. Information gleaned from the discussion can be used to further improve the program.

There needs to be some kind of internal support mechanism/process in place for a mentoring program to be successful. A competent individual or office needs to take responsibility for coordinating things like: an orientation session; providing appropriate resources like articles; books and DVDs; mapping out a schedule for people to meet; monitor attendance; intervene if there is a problem with a mentor pair. Some institutions use a mentor coordinator to keep the whole process moving smoothly.

The mentor should not be in any kind of supervisory relationship with the mentee. This is an essential factor in the process. There can be no consequences (positive or negative) for sharing confidential information. It is most helpful if the mentor can be at least two levels higher than the mentee so they can provide networking, strategic ideas and sage advice. (Creating a mentoring culture)

Contact is essential and we found that once a month for a couple of hours is minimal. If it can be more often, that's even better. Some of the meetings can be over a meal but real work must be the focus of the interaction. These meetings cannot be hurried conversations or a hallway meeting. Both parties must come to do real work.

Confidentiality must be assured. The mentees's conversation, ideas and personal sharings need to be held sacred. This helps build trust and encourages openness. As the mentee shares more, the mentor gains insight into their character, their values, their aspirations and their appetites.

## **Advice for Mentees**

Being a mentee is essentially an apprentice approach to leadership (Ram Charan's book goes into detail about the apprentice approach). By building an honest and authentic relationship with a respected and knowledgeable mentor, the mentee can learn a great deal about the complexities of leadership.

Mentees need to acknowledge that they are involved in the relationship to learn. They need to communicate that they want to become a student about effective leadership, organizational complexity and politics, decision making and ethics. They cannot be passive learners and must be willing to invest in the relationship.

Come prepared to meetings. This conveys respect to the mentor and uses their time well. Although there is a social dimension to this relationship, it is essentially a work relationship. Be on time, make it easy for the mentor to meet with you (e.g. meet at their office, work around their schedule). Follow through on commitments and do your homework.

Be open and honest with the mentor. You aren't there to impress them. You are there to learn. Share your aspirations and your concerns.

## **Group Mentoring**

Over the past several years, group mentoring has emerged as a way of leveraging a mentor's time and impact. This is where a small (3-4 people) group of individuals meet on a regular basis for several hours to: set individual development goals and build the skills and competencies to achieve their goals. The group can also act as peer mentors, offering advice, perspective and psychological support.

When done well the mentees act as an effective support group and network for each other. Because they are on a learning journey together, they often build positive relationships with each other that can last over time. An additional benefit is the multiple sources of feedback participants receive from the mentor and each other.

There are some drawbacks to this kind of approach, the primary one being confidentiality. In a group setting, it is challenging to maintain confidentiality.

Not everyone likes to work in groups, especially around personal stuff and challenges.

A meaningful relationship with the mentor might not get established if there are others vying for time, attention and advice. The relational aspect of one-to-one mentoring is lost.

*THE SANAGHAN GROUP (2009)*