



5 Ways to Mess up Mentoring

by Ann Tardy

Whether you are creating a mentoring program or launching a mentoring initiative, mentoring requires three components to be successful: strategy, scalability, and sustainability.

Through our years of designing, implementing, and administering mentoring programs, we have witnessed a variety of mentoring endeavors – some good and some disastrous. I have categorized these disastrous efforts in order to highlight the hazards you may face and to recommend a few strategies you can use to avoid these common pitfalls altogether.

Here are the five ways that organizations mess up mentoring:

1. Drive without a GPS

Too often mentoring sounds like a good idea and gets embraced for that reason alone. What results is an aimless program that fails to drive desired employee behavior, fails to accomplish identified corporate goals, and eventually gets abandoned because “it didn’t work.” Without a goal – a reason for the mentoring program – there can be no strategy and without strategy, you won’t create a mentoring impact, let alone a mentoring culture.

Before you do anything else, determine why you want a mentoring program, what goals you have for the program, and what success will look like. Once you identify the goals for your mentoring, strategically design your program to drive those goals and don’t forget to measure your success.

For example, if one of your goals for the mentoring program is to better onboard employees into your company and acclimate them into the culture, then ensure that the mentoring program is incorporated into new employee orientation. If one of your goals is to develop new managers then participation in the mentoring program needs to be a requirement of new management training. And if another goal is to encourage knowledge transfer from more seasoned employees, then incorporate a knowledge share feature into your program, such as a “wiki”.

2. Force One Size to Fit All

Just like each person is different, so is each culture in which those people work. Too often it is assumed that the success from a hands-on mentoring program with a small group of employees can be easily scaled to meet the needs of a larger culture when the organization rolls the program out to all of its employees. But one size does not fit all. Mentoring programs should be tested in pilots with small groups but ultimately designed for the end user group.

For instance, assume you hand-picked and matched the individuals to participate in your program using in depth personality and strengths assessments and your program achieved great success. Then, when you want to scale the same program to a much larger audience, you will fail to achieve a similar success. As another example, if you design and pilot a



program for managers and then roll it out to employees at all levels hoping for the same success, you will likely fail to meet the needs of your non-manager employees. As a further example, assume your culture is struggling with transition and attrition and you launch a mentoring program with a one-month pilot to great success. If you envision requiring participants to commit to one-year relationships your program will likely suffer because too many participants will be orphaned mid-stream.

Successful mentoring demands that you design a program that will scale to meet the needs of all your end users, now and in the future. While we strongly encourage that you use pilot programs to test the functionality of your mentoring program and generate support and excitement for it, you need to be thinking from the beginning of how you can scale your program and keep it flexible to meet changing needs.

3. Become a Babysitter

Mentoring programs involve creating relationships between people and, as a result, are ripe for administrative headaches. Too often the mentoring program design requires someone to act as a kindergarten teacher – holding participants’ hands in order for the relationships, and thereby the program, to work. If your program requires a babysitter to survive, it will never scale nor sustain itself. Be sure your mentoring program forces your participants to take responsibility for the creation and development of their own relationships. For example, allow your participants to choose who they work with and how long or short that relationship will last. The most successful programs are set up so that participants can engage with a variety of people the program, depending on their situations and their needs, and create anything from mentoring conversations to long-term mentoring relationships.

You don’t need to baby-sit your participants; you just need to create a program and provide a structure that sustains itself through your participants. For example, incorporate a way for participants to recommend mentoring connections among their peers. Your participants will fuel your program, allowing you to move on to other projects. A good program survives without tremendous administrator involvement and effort because the participants self-generate the mentoring. Ultimately, administration must be easy, with a larger focus on facilitation. This subtle, but critical element is what will yield a sustainable program. If a program is dependent on an administrator holding the hands of its participants every step of the way, it will never scale, let alone survive the long haul.

4. Assume People Know How to Play Well Together

Build it and they will come, but will they know what to do when they get there? Just because you set up a mentoring program doesn’t mean that people know how to mentor or be mentored.

A cornerstone of your program must include training of your mentors and mentees and on-going guidance and advice for developing effective mentoring relationships. It is important that you train both the people who will be doing the mentoring (the “mentors”) as well as those who will receive the mentoring (the “mentees”). Unfortunately too many programs only train mentors and then those individuals bear the brunt of mentees who



use and abuse the relationships. Don't assume that people know how to mentor or receive mentoring.

In addition, too many programs offer training at the launch of the program but then offer no additional guidance along the way. This poses two problems: (1) it assumes that all of your mentoring participants will start at the same time; and (2) it assumes that participants will learn all they need to know about mentoring in their initial training.

In general, standalone training has about a 24% impact on individuals whereas, training combined with practice has an 88% impact. Essentially, people learn when they do, and they aren't doing the doing until after the training ends. So, your participants need on-going training, tune-ups, and guidance while they are engaged in the program. Don't stop at the initial training and expect effective mentoring relationships to result.

5. Thinking You're Done Once it Launches

Inspect that which you expect is a well-known adage that applies to your mentoring efforts. A successful mentoring program must prove its success in order to ensure it. Admittedly, a mentoring program is not the center of your universe; it's just one of the many projects on your mile-long list of projects to accomplish this year. By the time you get it up and running, you're usually on to the next project. But without measuring your program's success and modifying it to meet the changing goals, culture, and situation of your organization, your program will fail as a result of being ignored.

Instead, engage a focus group during your planning stages and include employees from various departments and locations who will provide you with a reality check for your ideas, offer new ideas and feedback, and be your on-the-ground street team. Then incorporate a monthly skills development event for participants that can be coordinated and aligned with the company's other training and development efforts. This allows your program to stay relevant as well as to stay on everyone's radar screen on a monthly basis. Finally, collect feedback and metrics every chance you get. From surveys to testimonials, measure your success in order to sustain it.

Mentoring Mojo

The purpose of a mentoring program is to create and foster a mentoring culture among your people. Don't sabotage your success by succumbing to the predictable pitfalls outlined herein. Instead, focus on creating a program that is strategic, scalable and sustainable. Only then will you create successful mentoring and pave the way for a mentoring culture.

To learn more about these pitfalls and strategies to avoid them, contact us at The LifeMoxie Company for a complimentary needs assessment or program evaluation. Let us share our mentoring mojo with you! Call us at 1.888.676.6943 or email info@lifemoxie.com.