

Mentors in the office

8 January 2012 by Gareth Naughton

Companies looking for a cost-effective way to maximise employee productivity should consider developing an internal mentoring programme.

Business mentors use their experience to help budding entrepreneurs set up their companies and expand their products. But the same positive effects can happen within an organisation.

Mentoring pushes people forward and helps them to get a sound footing, according to Adrienne O'Hare, managing director of To Be Training and Development. "If you ask successful business people what helped them on the way, you often hear stories of a more senior business person who mentored them," she said.

"They may not use that language specifically but you can recognise that they have been guided, supported, pointed in the right direction or given an introduction to the right person that helped them to be really effective and confident and grow on their own."

Setting up a mentoring programme does not cost a lot and it works at all levels of the organisation from junior to senior.

You are essentially introducing two employees to each other and encouraging them to help each other within a defined relationship.

Indeed, a mentoring programme cannot be prescriptive. Both parties need to want to take part – it will not work if either is forced to do so – and they need to be able to work well together.

"The mentor needs to have a desire to support other people and to share their knowledge as well as a number of skills – being able to advise, question and to draw those being mentored out of themselves to help them solve problems rather than just give them all the solutions," said O'Hare.

"They also need to have really good communication skills and the ability to build rapport. There needs to be a really good match between the mentor and the one being mentored because not everyone will work well together."

Boundaries

For any mentoring relationship to work, it is important that the participants establish defined boundaries across a whole range of issues before commencement.

This need not necessarily be a written contract but both parties should be really clear on what is acceptable.

"How often are they going to meet? Where are they going to meet? How are they going to communicate – do they meet over lunch, do they meet in an office or over drinks? Do they email in between or just use the phone?"

“Confidentiality is very important and needs to be set up in the mentoring agreement as well. They need to set out in advance what is appropriate or inappropriate for both parties. It is also useful to have a defined beginning and end for the relationship,” said O’Hare.

“You can decide to go on, but people often outgrow their mentors. Someone mentoring them for 12 months may be perfect for that time, but the one being mentored may have gained the skills, knowledge and confidence that they need so it is time to move on.”

Managing expectations is crucial to ensuring that the relationship runs smoothly and both parties are happy with the end result.

“The ones being mentored have a number of responsibilities – they have to respect that they are asking somebody who is, obviously, very busy if they are in a senior role in an organisation to give their time and their expertise,” said O’Hare.

“So, for example, show up for meetings on time, Respond to any email communication and be respectful of the time that you are being given. Do not spend it whining about how unfair things are or giving out about other people.”

Independence

With your mentor available to guide you through challenges and tribulations, it could be tempting to become reliant on their support.

Those being mentored should ensure they do not become over-reliant on their mentor and that they are capable of making decisions in their own right.

“It is important to maintain your independence and to recognise that it is about your growth and learning as a mentee, so you do not have to run everything by your mentor or need their approval before you make a decision,” said O’Hare.

“Sometimes, relationships can develop in such a way that there is an over-reliance. However, if it is set up well with the boundaries and expectations established, and if you are clear about what you want to get out of it then, generally, there are very few pitfalls compared to a lot of benefits.”

Leveraging benefits

Ad hoc mentoring goes on all the time, but companies that really want to leverage the benefits set up a plan. A mentoring programme developed by life assurance company Acorn Life was opened to new recruits last year.

Acorn Life operates on a tied agent structure. Brokers are self-employed and run their own businesses. The idea behind the company’s mentoring scheme was to give new recruits the support needed to navigate their first year in operation, according to Tom Hannigan, head of Acorn’s training and development.

“Being a professional adviser can be challenging because you operate your practice on your own so, when you are meeting clients, there is no one observing you to see what you are doing,” said Hannigan.

“If you played sport, you would have a coach watching you at training and helping you, so, basically, we wanted to put a support structure in place for people entering the business.

“We wanted them to have a sounding post if they came across a query or something that they hadn’t experienced previously; to ensure that they would have somebody who is experienced in the business who they can bounce these things off,” he said.

The company developed a training programme, delivered over a six-to-seven-month period, to help mentors develop their own skills, particularly in the area of coaching.

Although it is early days yet, the effort appears to be paying off with those participating in the mentoring programme improving productivity by about 15 per cent. Mentors were also reporting improvements to their own businesses resulting from their involvement in the scheme, Hannigan said.

“Their results are improving because they are focusing on what it is that they do and it is helping them to build their business because they are looking at their own practices,” he said.

“Those being mentored have the knowledge but they may not be 100 per cent confident and they have the reassurance of an experienced professional that they are heading down the right road.

“Our business is all about building relationships and trust with clients and that can be damaged very quickly. The priority for anyone in the business is to make sure that they find out what suits their client, do a comprehensive fact-find and build a solution that meet their needs.

“That is quite a challenging thing to do when you are new to the business, so to have someone that is experienced and who can give you tips and guidance is hugely beneficial,” said Hannigan.