Chapter 4
Best-Practise Mentor Programmes

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on features of mentor programs and emphasizes their growing importance. It aims to bring clarity to the concept of mentoring and offers clear guidelines on how to set them up and make them best practices. It starts by looking at the different roles and definitions of mentors, sponsors, coaches, and line-managers and how they work together to enable employees to develop their potential in a workplace environment. A short overview of the change in human resource strategies over the last two decades shows the history and motivations as to why mentor programs have become not just an accepted people development tool but are also increasingly recognized as a reliable tool for influencing and changing organizational culture. Finally, key drivers of good mentor programs will be reviewed and an assessment of the benefits to the individual and organization provided. Trends in mentor programs will also be touched upon. References in this chapter are based on work with clients in industry and research conducted at Richmond, The American University in London.

DEFINITION OF TERMINOLOGY

A mentor is traditionally a senior manager or leader in an organization who, through experience and knowledge of an organization, is able to 'support' more junior employees. This support can take many forms; for example it might be advising on promotion opportunities, how to handle difficult relationships or how to approach problems – all within the scope of the mentor relationship because the more senior leader speaks from experience.

The term sponsor is sometimes used interchangeably with mentor. However technically speaking, a sponsor has more accountability for the support and career development that they offer their sponsoree (Paddison 2013). A sponsor might be measured on the success of their sponsoree through their performance management process whereas a mentor relationship is usually of more direct benefit to the mentee and of more intangible benefit to the mentor (Catalyst 2016). The mentor might be recognized publically for their role model behavior and impact in the development of others, although there may not be formal performance management recognition.

The line manager is the person who has direct responsibility for defining objectives, allocating tasks and reviewing performance against defined criteria in the performance management system. An experienced line manager will have 'coaching conversations' with individual team members, ask open questions and listen actively to enable team members to explore their own strengths and development needs.

Some leaders, managers and employees may employ the services of an internal or external executive coach – an independent professional who through various coaching techniques enables the coachee to deepen self-awareness and change behaviors. The focus of coaching sessions is usually to improve the coachees soft skills such as his/her leadership impact, team effectiveness and competence and confidence in bigger roles or demanding situations.

In a work environment, it is possible, and often also advisable, to have a line manager, a coach, a mentor and a sponsor. The line manager will give objectives and deliver the appraisal, the coach will support the employee to enhance behavioral skills, the employee may be assigned a sponsor to be supported through a readiness for promotion process, and a mentor may offer advice and support about current jobs, challenges and long-term career options. Used wisely, these different resources can accelerate the individual's performance and career opportunities significantly.

In this chapter, the terms 'mentor', 'mentorship program' and 'mentee' are used. However, it is acknowledged that in literature some aspects of sponsoring are included and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. More recently, some organizations have enriched the mentor role with some features of sponsoring and mentors are held directly responsible for the career progression of their mentees.

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