

HR INSIGHTS

Magazine

from the eyes of industry leaders



10 REALITIES That Undermine Your KNOWLEDGE- RETENTION Efforts

In This Issue ▶▶

Forward Filling as a Talent Management Strategy

The Importance of Employee Accountability

Hiring for "Fit" May Lead to Legal Problems

Mentorship: It's for Executives Too

MENTORSHIP: It's for EXECUTIVES Too

BY VALERIE GRUBB

An article about mentorship at *Inc.com* describes a mentor as “a person with more experience in business, or simply in life, who can help [someone] hone her or his abilities and advise him or her on navigating new challenges.”¹ HR executives have long known the value of mentoring employees, particularly high potentials destined for leadership positions within the company. But how often do those executives find mentors for themselves? Not often enough! When I recently polled over 100 HR executives about this at a conference, less than 20 percent of them said they had formal mentors.

As HR feels increasing pressure to provide more strategic value to the company, it's now more critical than ever that the HR executive identifies senior leaders both within and outside the company who can foster his or her development. Such a relationship sounds great, but finding and landing the right mentor can be challenging.

DETERMINING WHAT YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE

Pinpointing what's important to you will save both your time and your potential mentor's time. So when identifying who will be a good mentor, *start with the end in mind*. Ask yourself what you seek to gain from a mentor and how he or she can help you reach your goals.

Understanding what you hope to achieve through the relationship will help you narrow down the list of candidates to approach. Most



importantly, don't limit yourself to fellow HR leaders. A mentorship with a non-HR executive can broaden your knowledge base and make you more valuable to the organization (and, in particular, to the C-suite).

It's also important to ask yourself what you can offer to a mentor that will make it worthwhile for both of you to meet. Remember, mentorship is a two-way street. So in order to entice someone to mentor you (especially someone you don't know), you need to understand what you can bring to the relationship.

LOOKING FOR A MENTOR

If you've rolled out an official mentorship program at your company, don't forget to participate in it yourself. (Remember, such programs are great for retention—and that includes you as well!) Employer programs are usually designed to help employees meet specific goals that support the organization. So depending on what goals you want to achieve from your mentorship, your company program may not be in line with what you're hoping to gain (even if you're the one who developed the program!). In that case, you'll need to seek a mentor elsewhere.

If your company doesn't have a mentorship program or if the one it has doesn't fit your needs, review your own professional networks for possibilities. For example, look at executives within your company, LinkedIn connections, fellow alumni from your alma mater, and connections who are in your industry or share your group affiliations. Other great sources for potential mentors are networking events, conferences, and trade shows. Always be on the lookout for someone who has the skill set (or position) that interests you.

MAKING THE INITIAL CONTACT

Once you pinpoint a potential mentor, try to find out as much as you can about him or her before you reach out. See if you have any common connections on LinkedIn too. When you aren't already personally acquainted with a potential mentor, getting a positive introduction from someone you both know can definitely work in your favor.

When reaching out to someone with whom you have no connections, make sure your introduction mentions anything the two of you have in common, your own specific interests, and what you're looking for in a mentor. The goal is to pique this person's curiosity enough for

him or her to want to at least speak with you over the phone. Keep your note clear, specific and succinct; if you ramble in this opening communication, your potential mentor is likely to assume that you'll also ramble when you meet in person.

When a potential mentor agrees to have an initial conversation with you, ask for a 15-minute phone call. Make sure you watch the clock and stick to that amount of time! Doing so lets your mentor know that he or she can count on you to respect his or her time in the future (an especially important consideration when interacting with someone who is very senior in your field or someone you don't know well).

If you don't hear from your potential mentor two or three weeks after your first contact, follow up—but don't hound him or her. If that follow-up effort doesn't yield results, you need to assume that he or she isn't interested in pursuing a mentorship with you right now. You can still try to maintain a relationship (even if one-sided) by sending notes or articles that may interest him or her, but be careful not to become a nuisance.

MEETING WITH YOUR MENTOR

Always keep in mind that your mentor is doing you a favor. So be appreciative of the time that your mentor takes out of his or her schedule to assist you. You want to make it as easy as possible for your mentor to help you! Don't make assumptions about your mentor's availability and preferences—be sure to ask how he or she would like to communicate and how often. If you'll be meeting in person, traveling to your mentor's location not only makes your appointments more convenient for him or her but also lets you make the most of your scheduled time together.

During your first meeting (whether it's in person or via phone or video chat), ask for your mentor's advice on a single topic or problem. Don't overwhelm him or her with every question you have! Instead, use this opportunity to build rapport that can provide the foundation for a long-term relationship (rather than a one-and-done meeting).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Your mentor's advice may not always be easy to swallow. But remember, he or she is successful for a reason. So follow the advice you give to employees at your company: set aside your own pride, and allow yourself to be both teachable and coachable. Cultivate the relationship by asking questions and listening sincerely to your mentor's answers, and keep in mind these other suggestions:

- **Help your mentor help you.** If you have a specific question or need, tell your mentor. It's up to you to do the homework for your meetings and set the agenda.
- **Have fun!** Although your ultimate goal is to learn, nothing says you can't enjoy the time you spend with your mentor too. Make your meetings a time that both of you look forward to.
- **Return the favor.** You're bound to excel in some area in which your mentor needs assistance. Mentorship is a reciprocal relationship, so try to help your mentor in any way that you can.

Remember, you get out of a mentorship program what you put into it. So make it worth both your time and that of your mentor's. If nurtured, the relationship with your mentor can be one that lasts throughout your career! ■

Valerie Grubb of Val Grubb & Associates, Ltd., is an innovative and visionary operations leader with an exceptional ability to zero in on the systems, processes, and personnel issues that can hamper a company's growth. Grubb regularly consults for mid-range companies wishing to expand and larger companies seeking efficiencies in back-office operations. Her expertise and vibrant style are also in constant demand for corporate training classes and seminars. Her first book, *Planes, Canes, and Automobiles: Connecting with Your Aging Parents through Travel*, was published in October 2015 and is available at Amazon and local bookstores. She can be reached at vgrubb@valgrubbassociates.com.

1. 2010. "How to Find a Business Mentor." *Inc.com*. <http://www.inc.com/guides/how-to-find-a-business-mentor.html>.

**“Tell me and I forget.
Teach me and I may remember.
Involve me and I learn.”**

—XUN KUANG, 3rd century BCE
Chinese philosopher

