

Mentoring: is there a strategic fit in your firm?

Introduction

Through the Engineers Ireland Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Accredited Employer scheme, co-funded by the Irish Government's Department of Education & Skills, mentoring is currently at the forefront of strategies to improve workplace learning for engineering professionals in Ireland. In this context Engineers Ireland runs an award-winning training programme to assist employers in tapping into the benefits of mentoring.

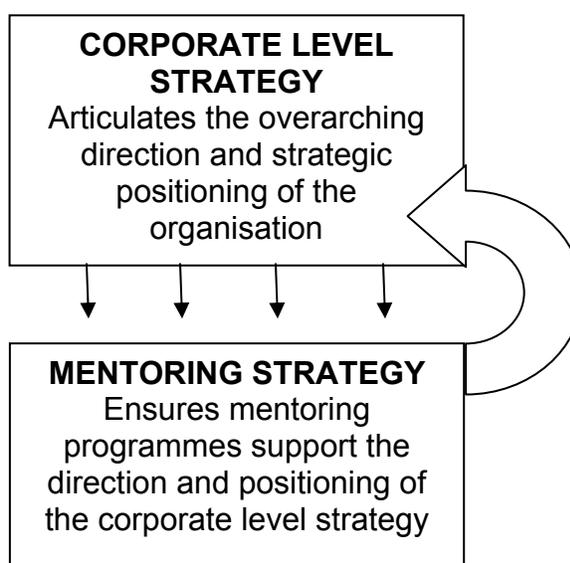
Many firms make the mistake of implementing mentoring without aligning it to their long-term objectives and the strategic positioning of the organisation. It is hoped this paper will assist top management teams in ensuring that there is a strategic fit. Having a corporate level mentoring strategy will contribute immensely to the long-term effectiveness of the mentoring process.

Strategic positioning of a firm

Typically when a firm sets its strategy, it develops or reviews its mission, vision and long-term objectives, then allocates the appropriate resources to ensure that the selected strategies are properly executed. A large body of recent research points to the benefits of mentoring for (i) the professional development of staff and also for (ii) knowledge exchange purposes. Thus, any organisation seeking to gain the maximum benefit from using a more formalised mentoring programme

should have a clear corporate strategy that identifies which groups of staff most need CPD, and at what stage in their career they need it. A mentoring strategy should also ascertain where a firm could most benefit from improved knowledge exchange. Answering these questions will assist with the development of an effective mentoring strategy.

In effect, a corporate mentoring strategy, devised in this way, provides a business case for formal mentoring.



A corporate mentoring mission statement and goals can be created to state the purpose of your formal mentoring programme and the desired outcomes to be achieved. This 'strategic fit' between formal mentoring and the organisation's corporate level strategic positioning will mean your mentoring programme will be both credible and open to evaluation.

In this way, the types of mentoring programmes offered by an organisation should allow the different divisions and/or departments to customize their formal

mentoring programmes to meet the needs of the division or department. Hence, the target audience of the formal mentoring programme will ultimately determine the contract agreed between mentor and mentee. This ensures the areas of focus between the mentor and mentee are clear. Mentoring remains on track. Results are achieved. The results are in line with the overall organisational goals.

Mentoring strategies in action

Case 1 – Mentoring for Innovation

Engineers Ireland has worked with a large number of employers in both the public- and the private-sector to improve their strategic use of mentoring. For example, one large electronics firm used mentoring to enhance its strategy for product innovation. The organisation's mission to become a leading innovator was clear. Once the mentoring strategy was aligned, a whole series of decisions flowed from that with regard to how the formal mentoring programme would be run. Mentors were chosen based on certain criteria (a passion for change, project management skills, creativity, excellent communication skills, emotional maturity) and paired with mentees who were potential key innovators for the firm. Mentoring training was carried out for mentors and mentees, with a clear mentoring contract which set out the functions and aims. Two years later, the firm introduced a significantly increased number of product innovations.

Case 2 – Mentoring for Graduate Development

Engineers Ireland worked with a utilities firm which had a large number of older engineers approaching retirement age. As the organisation took on more and more new hires and graduates, it was of key strategic importance that the tacit knowledge of the more experienced workers was passed on to the more junior engineers. Mentors were selected based on their likely ability to share stories, examples and experiences and to help new staff settle in to the large firm. Mentoring training was carried out and a clear mentoring contract was agreed. Mentees and mentors were interviewed 12 months later. Learning outcomes for both were identified. In particular, it was clear that junior staff had benefitted from the experience and had gained insights from their more senior colleagues thus closing the knowledge gap.

Case 3 – Mentoring for Leadership Development

A public-sector organisation identified through succession planning that there was likely to be a deficit of suitable candidates for key leadership positions in the organisation. This strategic need was linked to a new mentoring programme with the specific aim of involving mentees in a process which would expose them to important leadership behaviours. Mentors were selected based on their ability to role model core cultural behaviours and to challenge mentees whose behaviours clashed with the desired cultural norms. Mentoring training was carried out and, in addition, all selected mentees were briefed on the purpose of the programme. Evaluating the success of the programme 18 months later, mentees identified

specific 'stretch assignments' which their mentors had involved them in, thus exposing them to the likely challenges of a leadership position. Specific lessons learned were identified. These included insights and fresh perspectives. Mentors and mentees said they felt more engaged as a result of participation in the mentoring process.

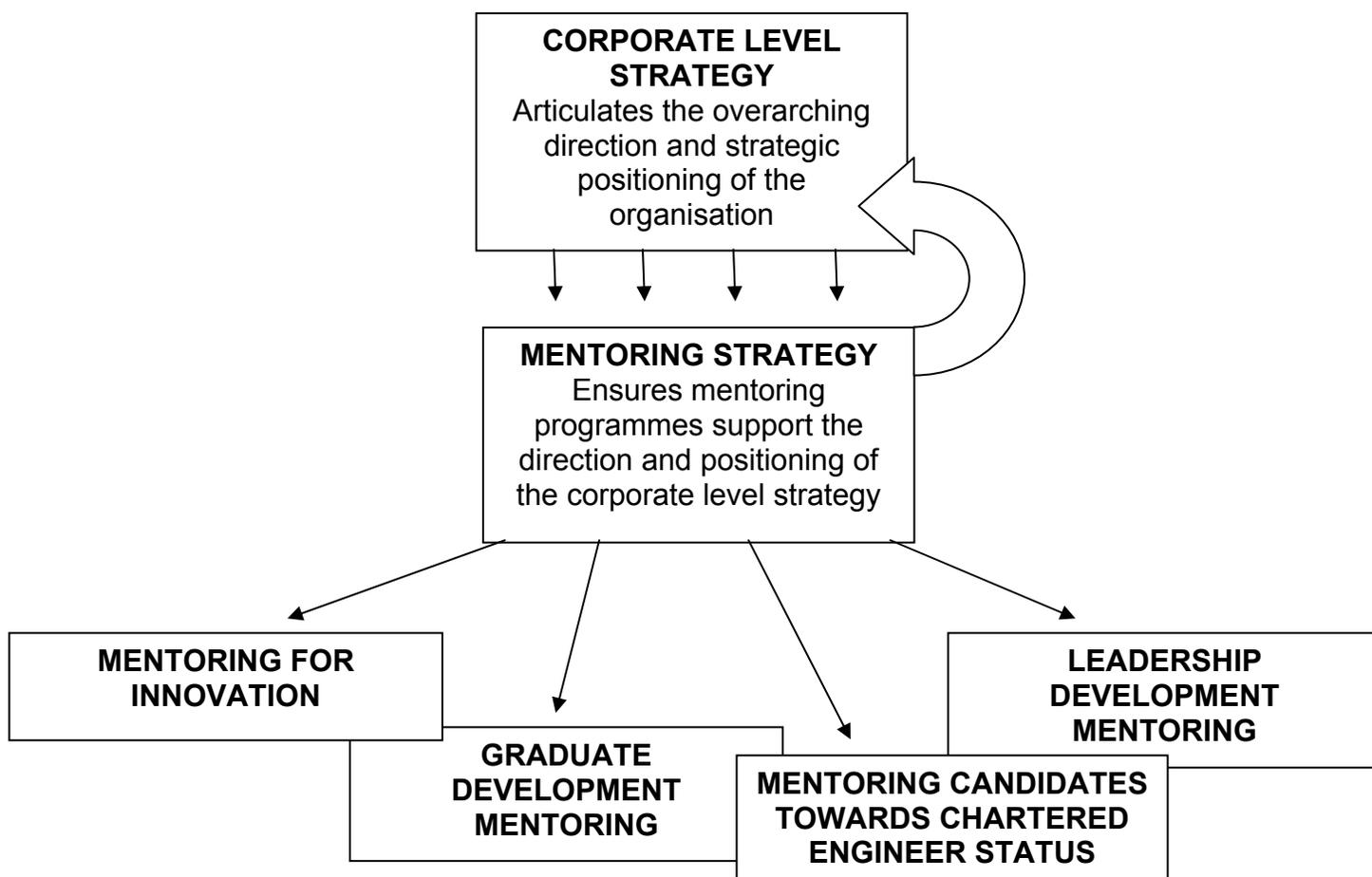
Case 4 – Supporting Candidates towards Chartered Engineer status

Engineers Ireland worked with a consultancy firm which wished to increase the number of Chartered Engineers within the firm to give them a distinct advantage over those competing for large international contracts. This strategic aim meant that the mentoring programme had to be tailored to ensure all mentors were fully aware of the 5 competences involved in achieving CEng status. They also had to be fully au fait with the process of applying to become a Chartered Engineer, and the interview process involved. Mentors were chosen based on their ability to guide others through a key development phase in their career. Mentors were trained in good mentoring techniques so that each mentee could devise a unique learning plan in preparation for applying to become a Chartered Engineer. The plan is to track the increasing numbers of Chartered Engineers within the firm, which should be of real benefit when tendering for international contracts.

Next Steps

Would your organisation like to see a better strategic fit between your mentoring programme(s) and the overall organisational goals? Do you feel your current

mentoring programmes lack direction and goal-clarity? If so, following the logic of this paper will allow you to create a clear link between the corporate level strategy and your mentoring strategy. Mentoring programmes will be aligned and tangible benefits can be measured as a result.



If you would like more assistance in developing a mentoring training programme that will complement your corporate strategy then contact the Engineers Ireland CPD Team for further information and assistance.

Aidan Harney, CPD Director, Engineers Ireland. T: 00353 1 6651314. Email:

aharney@engineersireland.ie