

SETTING UP A MENTORING PROGRAMME: Top 10 ideas

Setting up mentoring that works is fraught with difficulties, not least because programmes must match the culture of the organisation and have buy-in from the top. Thorough planning at design stage is key.

Designing a successful mentoring programme that delivers the results you are looking for can be a difficult process, particularly if the organisational culture is at odds with the philosophy of mentoring or the senior managers are paying only lip service to the programme's introduction.

Before even thinking about the programme design, talk to potential mentors and mentees and to some of the senior managers who may be expected to support and sponsor the programme.

The questions to ask are quite simple. They are about how supportive the culture will be in embracing mentoring and what obstacles or challenges mentoring may face. This feedback is such a useful guide to which steps need to be taken, particularly in influencing stakeholders and communication/publicity before the programme starts.

Types of mentoring

Another critical decision is which type of mentoring should be implemented:

- **Sponsorship:** focuses on career sponsorship by the mentor. The power dimension between mentor and client is usually fairly strong in this relationship. This is a more US-based model, closely associated with apprenticeships in professional practices.
- **Developmental:** places greater emphasis on learning and development and the growth of the client. The client or learner takes responsibility for their own learning. Engineers Ireland recommends this model, a more EU-based model, closely linked to Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Developmental mentoring should be a client-driven, two-way learning relationship. These days many talent management mentoring programmes will have some elements of sponsorship in their design and it is wise to be clear on the required outcomes of mentoring before defining the roles and behaviours of the mentor for the programme and agreeing where mentoring should sit on the development-sponsorship spectrum.

An effective mentoring programme should consider the following 10 points:

1. The rationale for a mentoring programme

What is the requirement for mentoring and how is it going to add value or contribute strategically to the organisation? It is important to identify what the objectives are for the programme and what outputs or success factors you are seeking. Don't just begin by identifying a pool of mentors and then hunt around for suitable mentees to work with them.

Make it work

- Always start from the 'client need'.
- Identify clear objectives

Fatal flaws

- Identifying individuals you think will make good mentors and not working from 'client need' first.
- Not identifying the programme success factors until you come to evaluate it a year later.

2. Influencing Stakeholders

Setting up and running any mentoring programme begins with influencing and gaining key stakeholder buy-in. Senior management support is vital. By exhibiting their commitment and enthusiasm to the initiative, leaders will influence other organisational members to accept and support the programme in the future.

Will you be identifying one particular mentoring champion to lead the programme? Who is going to have ownership of it within the organisation? Will this be with HR or the line?

Make it work

- Agree on the key stakeholders right at the beginning.
- Get these individuals to sign up to and support the programme within the organisation.

Fatal flaws

- Not identifying who is responsible for the programme at the beginning, so that the programme falls down between the senior line management champion and the HR function.
- Finding out too late that senior managers are not really supportive of the programme.

3. Recruitment strategy and communication

Identify the client target group and needs first, invite the clients to participate and then recruit appropriate mentors. All participants in the programme should be sought on a voluntary basis. Due consideration should be given to the way the programme is communicated to the rest of the organisation.

Make it work

- Make mentoring voluntary for the most successful results
- Ensure that individuals understand what is expected of them within a formal programme. Are there events they need to commit to? Do they realize how much time that participation in a relationship will take?
- Communicate a clear programme outline to anyone you are interested in recruiting, to include the benefits of their involvement, but also communicate with line managers and other stakeholders so there is complete transparency.

Fatal Flaws

- Making participation compulsory or 'politically correct' for ambitious individuals.
- Not communicating the programme effectively to the outside world and making mentoring seem only for the 'elite'.

4. Preparing the participants

Relationships are much more likely to succeed if formal training of mentors and mentees has taken place. As well as mentoring skills development, training provides the opportunity to raise concerns and questions before the relationship begins.

At a minimum, this preparation should encompass the programme purpose, objectives and the 4C mentoring process (developed by Engineers Ireland <http://www.engineersireland.ie/cpd/cpd-employer/mentoring/>) as well as roles and responsibilities of mentor and mentee, contracting, agreeing expectations and boundaries, skills and techniques (with an opportunity to practice in a safe environment), and the understanding of the lifecycle of a relationship.

Make it work

- Ensure there is some preparation, even if it is a short briefing. It will make a huge difference to the programme's success.
- A one-day initiative workshop for participants is fantastic, including time for practicing mentoring skills in a safe environment with feedback. If this is not feasible, a half-day workshop can also be effective.

Fatal flaws

- Letting mentors or mentees make it up as they go along
- Not covering how to have a mentoring agreement between mentor and mentee, so the safety net is missing.

5. The matching process and the *mentoring* process

This can involve identifying selection criteria and assigning pairs, or allowing self-selection for the mentoring pair. The most successful matching occurs where both parties feel they had some choice in their partner.

It is important that support is available if either party in a mentoring relationship is uncomfortable with the way it is going. If this is the case then a no-fault divorce clause can be invoked.

However, it is hard to predict what the chemistry of any pairing will be once they start working together. Sometimes opposites work wonderfully together. Sometimes people who are too alike don't learn anything.

Be imaginative and remember – what is more important than getting the match right is getting the mentoring process right.

Engineers Ireland provides expert advice on the 4C Mentoring model which has been implemented successfully in scores of engineering organisations across all sectors throughout Ireland. The model has been subject to a case study and research. <http://www.engineersireland.ie/cpd/cpd-employer/mentoring/>

Make it work

- Allow for some choice for both parties
- Train mentors in the 4C process

Fatal flaws

- 'Arranged marriages' with no get-out clause
- Making matches but not training mentors

6. Supporting the programme

Allowing mentors and clients to meet in support groups on a regular basis is one way of providing ongoing support to a mentoring programme and supervision for the mentors. It is also a critical chance to discuss concerns, gain some further knowledge or skills training and network generally with other programme participants.

Make it work

- Ensure all participants know who to contact if they have problems in their relationship.

Fatal flaws

- Leaving a programme to function on its own once it has been set up.

7. Review and evaluation

Mentoring programmes should be continually assessed to provide formative evaluation, which can be used to review the design and future implementation of the programme. In addition, summative evaluation should be completed at the end of each cycle of the programme. Evaluation should be conducted at programme and relationship level and focus on both process and outputs.

Some of the aspects to evaluate include programme and relationship processes selection criteria proportion of successes/failures, the training programme support, meeting frequency/relevancy/value and the learning acquired.

Other measurable areas include the impact of the programme on the retention, promotion and performance of individuals, as well as less tangible aspects such as self-confidence and self-belief.

Make it work

- Plan your evaluation as part of the initial programme design.

Fatal flaws

- Not assessing mentoring on an ongoing formative basis
- Not agreeing success factors at the start of the programme design.
- Not using the evaluation process to build a business case to develop mentoring further within the organisation.

8. The mentoring co-ordinator

Every mentoring programme needs a key person to take responsibility for its day-to-day running and operation, whether or not they were responsible for its design and implementation. The role of the mentoring co-ordinator or manager is to:

- Support the mentoring relationships once they are established;
- Handle difficulties between pairs should they arise;
- Rematch and refocus relationships when required;
- Ensure appropriate evaluation is completed at the appropriate phase of the relationship;
- Communicate and publicise results and feedback

9. The first meeting

Naturally mentor and mentee might be a bit nervous about their first meeting. HR or the mentoring co-ordinator can be on hand to do the introductions, if appropriate, and also line management can be involved.

Rather than hoping to 'get down' to mentoring right away, Engineers Ireland would encourage the mentor and the mentee to first complete a Learning Style questionnaire so that both parties can understand the learner's preferences and learning traits. Conducting such an exercise and sharing the results builds camaraderie, rapport and trust and can help with goal-setting and deciding what type of CPD will be involved in the mentoring process.

10. Mentoring looks different at different stages

Remember, depending on where a learner is in their career, the *type* of mentoring they might need can be very different. Graduates and new hires might be happy with guidance, instruction and 'buddying' whereas more established employees may want to be challenged (e.g. to become a Chartered Engineer) and they will need somebody who is comfortable with goal-setting, collaboration and coaching techniques. If somebody is considering a transition in their career or role they might just need a good 'sounding board' to help them weigh up their options.

FINAL WORDS:

Every organisation should build their own mentoring paradigm based on these good principles.

For further ideas contact ENGINEERS IRELAND's CPD department.

<http://www.engineersireland.ie/cpd/cpd-employer/mentoring/>

* * *