

## Managers as Mentors

By Ann Rolfe

One of the great benefits of mentoring is having access to an objective sounding board for your ideas. A mentor is someone with whom you can have a confidential conversation about your aspirations, share your dreams and your challenges, plan the next steps in your career development, or just vent your frustration before figuring a practical solution to problems. That's why we choose mentors who are "off-line", not the managers, or in a direct line of authority above the mentoree. Yet, shouldn't all managers be mentors? Is there really any difference between good leadership and mentoring?

Ideally, all managers would mentor their subordinates. Mentoring is definitely part of leadership if you want a team that consistently performs. Mentoring develops individuals and their increased capability builds the capacity of the team. But mentoring those who work under you is different from other forms of mentoring. In some ways it takes greater skill and maturity.

Managers and team leaders have responsibility for the day-to-day performance of subordinates. There is a power dynamic not present in other forms of mentoring. The immediate demands of getting the job done may take precedence over strategic objectives, particularly in today's lean organisations. This means managers and leaders who want to mentor need to:

- Create opportunities for mentoring conversations to occur;
- Aim for trust and openness but realise that subordinates may not speak as candidly to them as they might to a mentor outside the team; and
- Mentor constructively to enhance performance.

### Creating Opportunities

Most people are busy, so finding time to sit down for a mentoring conversation can be difficult and could even be intimidating to the subordinate. So managers who mentor may keep it light and informal, creating opportunities to extend normal interaction into purposeful engagement. A simple "how are things going today?" can be built on with questions like "what do you think is working especially well?" or, "what is the most difficult challenge". Good questions, excellent listening and genuine interest are key skills for mentoring. You don't launch into a full-blown mentoring conversation right away but gradually move towards exploring the person's development needs.

### Trust and Openness

The nature of communication depends on the nature of the relationship. Naturally, there are things a person doesn't want to discuss with their boss. Although some people willingly discuss the skills or abilities they lack, or their plans to move on or up, many will not and some have good reason to be guarded about full self-disclosure! It takes maturity not to see a skill discrepancy as deficiency and a visionary leader to put the long-term benefits of supporting an individual's career move above the possibility of losing a key performer. So managers must act with integrity to ensure that frankness is encouraged not penalised.

## Being Constructive

Mentoring is about building strengths, abilities and confidence. Scientific research demonstrated long ago that feedback is the most effective method way of getting what you want from people. They need positive reinforcement and corrective guidance. More recently, the magic ratio of positivity and negativity, that makes the difference between people who flourish and those who flounder has been identified as 3:1. That's right, we need three times as much positivity in our lives as negativity - makes you want to reach for the remote and turn off the TV news, doesn't it? For managers who mentor this is great because there is a very simple way to reduce stress and make lives better – yours and others. Just ramp up the amount of recognition and praise you give and use corrective guidance only when needed. Get the ratio of 3:1 right. A lot of managers struggle with this concept but imagine a yacht, positive feedback is like the wind in the sails. When the wind drops only the boat's momentum carries it forward, then it stops. Corrective guidance is like the rudder, vital to keep the boat on course.

60% of workers say they get no praise and even the most self-motivated people need acknowledgement and encouragement if they are to sustain performance. If you are like most people, you don't get enough positive feedback. Interestingly, when you give sincere praise to others their endorphins (feel-good chemicals in the brain) go up – and so do yours!

Secrets of success in giving constructive feedback...

- It must be **sincere**;
- give it **soon**;
- make it **specific**;
- **state** the benefit/outcomes;
- it's **shaped** to suit the person; and
- **shared** appropriately (celebrate wins, correct quietly).

Managers can and do mentor. They model, they teach attitudes and behaviour, they lead conversations that create insight, they stimulate development. Mentoring by managers is a little different, perhaps more directive and less overt but it is a vital part of the leadership role. Make it positive and mentoring works!