

Mentoring: Why Managers Fear Mentoring

By Ann Rolfe

Why do some managers actively discourage their subordinate's participation in mentoring? Or, even when they've agreed to allow an aspiring mentoree into a program, fail to provide support? What is it that prevents these managers from seeing the value that mentoring brings to individuals and organizations?

Barriers, obstacles or hurdles thrown up by people have one cause - fear. Most people become uncomfortable and defensive when they perceive anything mildly threatening. Unfortunately, work and life has become increasingly stressful in an uncertain environment, this lowers risk tolerance and may increase resistance to change.

So what might managers have to fear from mentoring? The most common concerns are:

- Lost productivity
- Loss of power
- Lost potential

Productivity

Managers, quite rightly, recognize that mentoring will take time. If mentoring takes place in work hours it's going to have an immediate impact on productivity. With a focus on short-term results, this is naturally a problem for managers.

Power

Managers worry that mentors will undermine their authority, give advice contrary to their legitimate directions or cast doubt on their competence. They think that their subordinates will talk about them and show them in a bad light. They may even be jealous of their subordinate's opportunity for development.

Potential

Mentoring is offered to people with potential. The personal and professional development of individuals builds organizational capability. However, this may mean good performers move on. A promotion or career move may be great for the person but bad news for their boss who has a gap that costs time and money to fill.

What Can You Do?

Lack of support by managers is a major hazard for mentoring. It cannot be ignored. Firstly, recognize that the manager's fears are not groundless and need to be addressed. Communication is the key and is needed to gain the support of all managers, not just the ones who are resistant.

To gain commitment and allay fears you will need strong communication delivered repeatedly and with credibility from the very top of the organization. The message should be loud and clear that

mentoring is an investment in productivity and that it is of strategic value to the organization. Information needs to be very specific, not only about the positive outcomes expected from mentoring but also the danger of *not* developing people. Bear in mind that if managers are responding from fear they are less likely to pay attention to positive counter-argument. Their fear receptors are on alert for warning signs.

Secondly, train mentoring participants. Mentorees should talk to their managers about mentoring. The content of a mentoring conversation is confidential but mentorees are more likely to gain and keep the cooperation of their managers if they talk about how what they learn impacts on their current performance. Mentoring develops people for the future but increased ability can translate into greater productivity in the present.

Train mentors to respect the authority of managers. They should be accepting of comments from their mentoree but recognise that they are getting only one side of the story and refrain from judgement. Mentors use listening and questioning to help their mentoree figure out what to do. If it appears that a mentoree has a grievance or serious problem with their manager, it should be handled through appropriate channels and the mentoree should consult an HR professional.

Finally, keep managers in the loop. Engage them in two-way communication before, during and after any mentoring program. Provide management briefings before the launch of mentoring that give the strategic overview, describe expected outcomes and specify the level of management commitment required. Facilitate the opportunity for them to air their concerns and address issues. Provide regular updates so they know what's going on. Report successes achieved as mentoring progresses.

Of course, you could provide mentoring for managers so they experience for themselves just how mentoring works!