

Seven Fatal Flaws of Mentoring Programs and How to Avoid Them

By Ann Rolfe, Founder, Mentoring Works

Is Your Mentoring Program Living up to Expectations?

Can you point to results of mentoring that impact on your organisation's bottom line? Are the majority of mentoring relationships producing the desired outcomes? Will your program be allocated additional resources in the next round of funding because it is a high-value business strategy?

If not, the mentoring program's longevity may be limited. A successful mentoring program that doesn't achieve its full potential is a concern. But a failed mentoring program, or one that "fizzles out" leaves staff cynical and management contemptuous of human resources strategies.



What If Your Mentoring Program Were a Showcase of Excellence?

Imagine what it would be like if your mentoring program were the benchmark for other industries. Or, other organisations looked at what you had done and tried to copy it. If you can avoid the seven fatal flaws they will.

If you have a mentoring program now, or you are planning one soon, use the common mistakes listed below as a checklist of sound design.

1. Unclear Strategic Value
2. Insufficient Lead-time and Planning
3. Under-resourcing
4. Inadequate Support
5. Not Enough Training
6. Lack of Structure and Follow-Up
7. Ineffective Monitoring, Feedback and Evaluation

1. Unclear Strategic Value

Your program must be linked to corporate objectives and integrated with key strategies. The program has to matter to all the stakeholders. Objectives, in hard-nosed dollar terms, statistics and other quantifiable measures are necessary. Warm fuzzy, human resources initiative are simply not good enough. You have to spell out the return on investment.

You must find out where your organisation is hurting and deliver solutions to the pain. For example, is staff turnover an issue? Are you facing a skills and knowledge deficit in a few short years as mature workers retire? Are you recruiting but failing to retain "Gen Y" career cadets?

You must make a business case for your program and speak in the language of the bean counters as well as current buzz words.

2. Insufficient Lead-Time and Planning

Use a whiteboard to develop a timeline. Brainstorm everything that must happen before mentoring pairs get together for the first time. Most organizations find a realistic lead-time, depending on internal resources available and degree of material developed from scratch, is between three and six months, after the sign-off on budget.

3. Under-Resourcing

Even when you bring in external specialists and use prepared materials such as workbooks, journals and training, internal staff are essential to coordinate the program. Time, as well as money, must be dedicated to the project. The coordinator role cannot simply be added to a person's current full-time job if mentoring is to be taken seriously and achieve results that impact on the bottom-line.

4. Inadequate Support

For a program to work it needs commitment from the top, middle managers and the target population. Evidence of the real need for the program and tangible benefits (i.e. strategic value) can be used to "sell" the program. The benefits must be couched in the language of each group. Each must be convinced using "What's In It For Me" (WIIFM). You cannot let up once the program is implemented. You must continually market and reinforce the value of mentoring. Take a tip from marketing strategists. Most car advertising is aimed, not at getting people to buy, but to reinforce the decision of those that have *already* bought to maintain brand loyalty.

5. Not Enough Training

It is a mistake to assume managers know how to mentor. Even if they are good coaches, the skill set is different. They need to know their role, the boundaries and expectations of mentors. They need to develop specific communication skills and the facilitative and authoritative styles that make mentoring work.

Those being mentored also need to know how to get the most out of the relationship. They need to put together a plan, that they will drive, in order to achieve their own goals for mentoring.

It is difficult to get people to lengthy workshops, so short ones complemented by other delivery methods, may be necessary.

6. Lack of Structure and Follow-Up

If you put people together and say; 'Go forth and Ment!' some will. But many, with good intentions, will be clueless about what, specifically, they should be doing and how to go about it.

Some need a step-by-step procedure to follow and others need a more general guide for each mentoring meeting. They also need a method of tracking progress.

In addition, the coordinator needs to personally follow-up each participant or have some efficient way of checking that mentoring is, in fact, happening and both parties are satisfied. Most problems in a mentoring relationship can be solved with early recognition and action. All parties benefit from knowing someone is interested in them and available for assistance.

7. Ineffective Monitoring, Feedback and Evaluation

Records of progress, before and after measures and participant feedback may be time consuming to collect and collate. However, the continuation of mentoring will depend on your ability to demonstrate tangible outcomes. Data should be gathered over the life of the program and reported periodically and strategically. For example, success stories in the staff newsletter, management reports - including pretty graphs and charts, media releases and conference presentations, promulgate the message of achievement and value.

Conclusion

Many organisations have a tendency to "tick the box", having implemented a new strategy, then forget it. If you believe in mentoring, you will need to be vigilant in maintaining your program. Good mentoring must get better and great programs must be celebrated to maintain the enthusiasm of all concerned. The seven fatal flaws are mistakes that can be avoided with forethought and planning.

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About Ann Rolfe

Australia's most published author on mentoring, Ann Rolfe has thirty years' experience in learning and development and a background in career counselling. For more than two decades, she has specialised in mentoring, setting up programs and training people in fields as diverse as health, construction, energy, communications, education, law and government.

Internationally respected as a trainer, consultant and presenter, her training programs and resources are used in many countries to develop and support mentoring. Ann has spoken at national and international conferences in Australia, Canada, China, the Philippines, Singapore, The Philippines and USA. She runs regular webinars that attract participants from around the world.

Ann Rolfe's contributions to mentoring have been recognised with the 2011 LearnX Asia Pacific Platinum Award for Best Coaching/Mentoring Training Program and in 2013, the New South Wales Juvenile Justice Excellence Award for Innovation.

Ann Rolfe is the founder of Mentoring Works where we help you create mentoring conversations, relationships and programs that work. We offer a comprehensive range of resources and training that provide clear, practical guidance based on extensive experience and expertise.

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