

# Mentoring's Role in Succession Planning

Mark Brenner - 4/30/08

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It's no surprise more than 80 percent of senior executive recruits change employers within two years of hire. It takes a lot to make today's knowledge worker happy. Once top talent is recruited into an organization, significant efforts must be made to develop, promote and ultimately to retain them. Yet, many succession management initiatives go down a dead-end path because traditional program efforts create an environment that works against the goals their designers had in mind.

There is also a widespread misunderstanding of how adults actually learn and develop, combined with an overreliance on technological solutions to the human challenges involved in creating, filling and maintaining a consistently reliable talent pipeline. The water gets even muddier because corporations continue to rely on unscientific assessment tools in their efforts to fill holes in their organizational charts.

Mentoring figures prominently in many of these dead-end succession scenarios because corporations default to mechanistic talent approaches to a developmental process that at its core is nonlinear, nonanalytical and unambiguously human in nature. As one of several facets of a robust succession management platform, mentoring cannot be delivered in assembly-line fashion.

Mentoring is talked about a great deal, but few people understand the high bar an effective mentor must clear. It requires a very personal and even intimate relationship. It's much more about EQ (emotional intelligence) than it is about IQ — it requires a high level of interpersonal finesse, particularly on the mentor's part. Mentoring must support the human learning process. Otherwise, its ability to transform individuals and organizations will be limited.

## Train Pets, Not People

Most succession management programs look wonderful on paper but discount the complexity of human relationships. In the modern workplace, programs play out inside the sterile, white space surrounding the boxes, circles and arrows of a company's flow chart.

Highly structured, formulaic processes generally follow the same flawed pattern as they attempt to:

- Address a perceived need for managers and junior executives to be schooled in leadership, performance management, conflict resolution and corporate citizenship.
- Create and implement a curriculum built around critical topics.
- Put a spark in or otherwise balance out the classroom elements of the design with a simultaneously running high-touch program.

- Match participants with an appropriate senior executive in a mentoring relationship.

Further, a structured, traditional mentoring approach may not always work because no one truly knows how to meaningfully or effectively pair people. Succession management often ignores that necessary development activities discount EQ in favor of IQ. To ascend the higher regions of a career arc, nearly all the leverage is in a person's EQ development and ability to cultivate:

- Accurate self-awareness.
  - Self-confidence and steward-like behavior toward colleagues and the world.
  - Thorough trustworthiness.
  - Transparency and authenticity (perceived by others as being an “open book”).
  - Full self-control.
  - Flexibility and a welcoming attitude toward change.
  - Passion for learning and achieving.
  - Consistent optimism and resilience.
  - Organizational astuteness.
  - Empathy as a teacher/mentor.
  - An image as an inspiring role model
- The goal of an effective mentoring process is for high-potential individuals to find their muse and true voice, which in turn allows them to focus their best qualities on their careers and personal lives.
  - Great enterprises aren't built by extraordinary people; they're built by large numbers of ordinary people whose hard work leads to meaningful contributions. And since that's where authentic human developmental processes occur in real life, that's precisely where an organization's heavy lifting must focus.

### **EQ's Role in Mentoring**

- A thriving mentoring — or succession management — process requires an organizational culture that understands EQ and cultivates it first with its managers and executives. This core group becomes the change initiative's EQ-savvy protagonists, and they may stand against those in the organization who have difficulty coping with experimental or ambiguous mentoring experiences. In the beginning and in the end, most of the critical success factors that underlie organizational change are psychological and emotional in nature.

Effective mentoring or adult learning, also called EQ competency development, takes place in an environment marked by:

- A transcendent mission to infuse the daily work environment with meaning.
- An urgent and personally obvious need for change.
- Equally obvious indicators of the rewards/benefits individuals and their teams will gain by participating in the change process.
- Engagement in practical, pragmatic and meaningful solutions.
- Respect for and capitalization on a diversity of perspectives, ideas and backgrounds. This requires that a company's leaders be adept at:
  1. Inspiring people.
  2. Getting fellow executives, managers and employees to believe in themselves and one another.
  3. Coping with nonrational behavior.
  4. Walking their talk about vision, values and strategy.

A mechanistic mentoring solution will never get an organization from here to there when it comes to succession management. The process needs to be fashioned and then lived day-to-day within the organization's culture.

## **Move From a Dyadic to a Communal Mentorship Model**

Depth and a substantive approach to succession management should change how organizations view the traditional mentor-learner archetype. A mentor is someone who takes a personal and systematic interest in a junior person's career development, guiding and sponsoring that person for advancement. Core mentoring competencies include being an effective listener, a proactive coach, a challenger, cheerleader and skillful teacher of organizational wisdom.

Mentees, on the other hand, have to prepare for the relationship by acknowledging they are in it to learn. This often requires being comfortable asking questions, revealing concerns, initiating contact with a busy mentor and even exposing certain vulnerabilities. The underlying notion that mentoring is essentially about an apprenticeship-like process, involving masters on the one hand and learners on the other, is a valid one that deserves support.

However, the manner in which most mentoring relationships are implemented is straining to fit today's nimble and change-friendly organizations. Women and minorities, in particular, find themselves increasingly ill served by the traditional model. Matching mentors and learners is simply a red herring that begs the following question: Why not give mentoring relationships a more strategic and communal bounce by turning them loose in a true learning and teaching organization? In this kind of environment, each person would be prepared to welcome an effective teacher in some situations and expected to act as an observant learner in others.

## **The Mentoring Launch Platform**

It's now well-known that the best way to develop high-potential individuals is to provide them with a series of stretch assignments in concert with the coaching and support necessary when they're pushed out of their comfort zones. This simple truth is anything but simple to execute in the real world.

Again, mentoring relationships are only one facet of the overall succession management platform. But leaders constructing a systemic path to follow the EQ arc should start at the beginning. The platform from which true adult learning can launch is built by creating a vision, articulating the mission, identifying core values, constructing a strategy map and outlining a strategic blueprint for execution.

The companies best positioned for success are those that already possess a deep respect for the extraordinary complexity of human beings and have a "talent culture" mindset. A strategic frame of mind is far more important than any set of tactics could ever be. Strategic-minded organizations value and cultivate a performance culture seeded with socially and self-aware protagonists, a population of change agents who thrive in a fluid, open-ended workplace experiment. Dynamic cultures such as these will attract like-minded people who want to work in a meritocratic, energizing and engaging organization. These workers generally are team players who enjoy and are adept at changing roles — from mentor to learner and back again, for example — with a speed and flexibility similar to what they demonstrate and find exciting in their personal lives.

Mentoring is one important link in this new process of succession management. The much larger process continually seeks greater optimization of the people value chain (PVC), which is a relatively new concept in the talent development arena. The PVC is a model for organizational transformation that applies the value chain concept, introduced by Michael Porter in 1985, to the people side of the overall business equation.

Companies that are serious about solidifying and extending their competitive advantage in the global marketplace need to realize that nearly all the organizational levers required to get them from good to great are related to people. They also need to realize their competitive edge is determined primarily by talent management and leadership expertise,

not by their core business processes. In short, profitability is about performance, and performance is about people, which is what the PVC process is all about.