



## OVERCOMING COMMON OBJECTIONS IN MENTORING PROGRAMS

As a mentoring consultant with over 14 years of experience in implementing formal mentoring programs in multiple industries, I have encountered a number of objections to formal mentoring. Some of these objections occur at the very beginning in considering formal mentoring while others occur during implementation or after completion. These objections are most often addressed to the company's internal Mentoring Program Manager. As an aid to those dedicated people who work diligently in promoting the benefits of mentoring to their organization, I have written this article that addresses the objections encountered most often. These are in no particular order of importance.

### A. Before Implementing a Program:

#### Why formal mentoring? Shouldn't it just happen naturally?

Mentoring does happen naturally but only for a limited few. Formal mentoring extends the benefits of mentoring to a larger population and also ties mentoring to the company's strategic business objectives: recruitment and retention of talent, succession planning for continued company success and removal of barriers that hinder an employee's full contribution to the company due to their sex, ethnicity, etc. Formal mentoring is a strategic initiative that helps create a continuity of success building upon the company's internal wealth of knowledge and experience rather than a hit or miss approach to talent development.

#### Isn't mentoring another form of coaching? Why do we need a separate program if we already coach?

Mentoring and coaching are NOT the same thing. Though they may share certain commonalities, they have very distinct differences. Coaching is primarily about assisting an employee in being more effective in their current job and is more akin to becoming a content expert. Thus, coaching can be developmental or remedial, often involves an outside coach and is directly tied to performance reward systems. Mentoring is primarily developmental for the future rather than on the current job and, though focused on specific acquisition of knowledge or expertise, it has a strong interpersonal development component. Coaching is about skill acquisition while mentoring is about a relationship. My other article on the 25 differentiators between coaching and mentoring can be requested to provide further insight into this issue.



Why can't this program be self-managed? Why does it need an internal Mentoring Program Manager?

Would you hire a manager to manage his/her department without providing the necessary resources to manage properly and meet departmental goals? Mentoring is a strategic initiative designed to assist in developing employees, a company's most important asset. Does it make good business sense to jeopardize that asset by failing to provide simple yet important guidelines and training on how to engage successfully in a mentoring relationship? Well-intentioned mistakes in mentoring can often lead to employees becoming dissatisfied and opting to leave the organization.

**B. During Implementation of a Program:**

I'm a manager or senior manager with several years of experience in developing people, why do I need to be trained in mentoring?

Attending mentoring training is not a reflection upon one's abilities to develop others. Rather, it is to ensure that both partners have the same understanding of what mentoring is and operate under the same guidelines. Too often, people who have had prior mentoring experience or who are natural developers believe that formal mentoring involves simply doing the same of what one already does. This assumption is what often derails a mentoring relationship.

People have differing styles in how they wish to be developed or how they develop. People have differing experiences of mentoring and other developmental programs and developing one's employees is very different from mentoring someone. Identifying these differences and explaining what mentoring is/is not and providing participants with important ground rules and tools is critical in creating a successful mentoring relationship. The purpose of mentoring training is not to remedy a defect in one's ability to develop others but to provide a common roadmap that has proven successful to creating good mentoring relationships.

We have conducted mentoring training for mechanics, engineers, and managers, all the way up the command chain to presidents of international corporations. The overwhelming response is that it provides both partners with a common understanding and provides tools that lead to creating an effective relationship sooner and more successfully.

Why can't we choose our partners rather than being matched?

A common assumption is that if partners choose each other rather than being paired by a matching committee, it will result in a better relationship. This assumes, therefore, that



formal matching is bad. This is not borne by the facts. Most formal programs do a very effective job of matching pairs using a combination of profile and interview data and a matching committee. This process brings a certain objectivity and avoids the most common drawback in people selecting each other; that of selecting someone like them - a kind of “mentoring halo effect”. In addition, self-selection has the disadvantage of people not fully knowing who is in the available mentoree or mentor population thus are likely to select the most popular or well-known individuals and miss the one partner who may be the best match.

Matching by committee, however, does not mean that some choice can’t be brought to the table. Often choice is allowed by presenting to the mentor/mentoree the recommended partner prior to matching and, if there is a compelling reason why this match would not work, another candidate is sought. Other creative options can also be explored.

Another assumption that feeds into this objection is that there must be “chemistry” between the two partners for it to work. Given that, it is further assumed that the only way to test chemistry is to allow each person to select the person with whom they feel most comfortable.

This confuses two mentoring models: informal and formal mentoring. In informal mentoring, chemistry is what drives the relationship. In formal mentoring, it is compatibility not chemistry.

### I’m a very busy person and can’t afford to spend the time on mentoring someone.

This objection is most often encountered when marketing the program to the mentor population. Clearly, everyone has great responsibilities that make demands on one’s time. This does not mean, however, that there isn’t time to mentor someone.

This objection is usually a knee-jerk reaction prior to knowing exactly how much time will be expected to be devoted to the program. In formal mentoring, partners are expected to meet every other week for up to 1 to 1 ½ hours. In my experience, most partners find that this is not an undue burden and can often be accomplished over lunch or breakfast. It does require a commitment but that commitment does not involve as much time as most people assume. Having clear cut guidelines and training in mentoring helps to set boundaries and assistance in how to reasonably manage a mentoring relationship without undue time demands.

The commitment to meet on a regular basis according to program guidelines is the clearest manifestation of someone’s willingness to engage in the mentoring relationship. Good intentions on the part of the mentor/mentoree is not enough. I would rather have a mentor who complains about the time commitment but follows through on it than someone who has every intention to meet but rarely does.



### **C. After the Program Objections:**

The program pilot has proven successful from the results of the evaluation process you concluded. In addition, you requested and received a number of recommendations. Some of the recommendations contradict one another while others seem to undermine some of the key best practices that created the success. What do you do?

When I evaluate program results, I do three things:

- I look at all the recommendations made and by whom and pay closer attention to what mentorees recommend than mentors. Why? Because the mentoring program is all about them and they are the ones who take the greatest risks in mentoring. The program needs to ensure that any recommendations enacted retain the safety net that enhances and protects the mentoree when being vulnerable in the mentoring relationship. In other words, I look at all recommendations through the eyes of a mentoree to determine if it will help or hinder a mentoree's ability to work effectively with a mentor.
- I look at the numbers carefully and avoid the common fallacy in logic, which is to use a small number to make sweeping generalizations and changes. This is particularly true when looking at mentor recommendations. Most companies pay more attention to mentor recommendations because mentors tend to have more influence in the organization. It does not automatically follow that wisdom resides in the recommendation. Sometimes the recommendation is more self-serving than helpful.
- I don't make changes simply because some partners are unhappy with a certain aspect of the program or find a certain aspect inconvenient. For me, the recommendation must meet the test of whether it will enhance or hinder the creation and ongoing maintenance of an effective mentoring relationship. For example, sometimes mentors will complain about "too much paperwork". When examined carefully, this usually means that they disliked completing a profile form, as that is usually the only form they are required to complete. If the mentor does not wish to complete a profile form, which provides important information for finding the right match, how does s/he propose that a right match be secured? Completing a profile form may be inconvenient but it is a necessary part of the matching process.

Following are common recommendations made after a pilot program:

Mentors and mentorees should make their own decisions as to how often they will meet:

This is usually a mask for lack of commitment to actually meeting. In my experience, people who don't want structure in mentoring will end up accomplishing very little



because they often place mentoring as a low priority among the myriad tasks in a given day. The guideline provide in the mentoring program of meeting 2 times a month for up to 1 to 1 ½ hours each is a standard that keeps the momentum going and ensures that the mentoring relationship develops. It also protects either partner from making too many demands on the other.

Training should be option and/or reduced to a mere 1 or 2 hours:

I've already discussed why mentoring training is important so will not repeat what was stated earlier. If your evaluations are not anonymous, always check the name of the person who makes this recommendation and whether or not they actually attended the training. Be sure to assess whether they had a good relationship or not.

Certainly some economies on training may need to be made due to demands made upon time or, in some cases, location or other exigencies. However, training in mentoring is not about being lectured about mentoring but in actually experiencing and practicing certain skills during the training. One hour or two is hardly adequate time to prepare for what is supposed to be a powerful and meaningful relationship.

The program should be longer or shorter:

There is no magic to the length of a mentoring relationship. Most programs tend to request a commitment of one year. It takes about 3-4 months for the pair to become comfortable with each other and begin to do the "real work" in the relationship. One year seems to satisfy most people as it gives people the opportunity to take their time and to determine the important issues of the mentoree and to have the time needed to address these adequately. I certainly don't recommend that a program be less than six months.

One option that works well is to say that the program is 6 months up to a year. This allows individual pairs some latitude in how long they will work together while at the same time providing a defined period when the commitment is over.

We don't really need the support of the Mentoring Program Manager:

This recommendation needs to be viewed a little differently than the others because it is an example of what is meant by the expression: "you don't know what you have till you've lost it."

The Mentoring Program Manager is vital in maintaining an effective mentoring program. S/he plays an important role as a resource for the mentoree, the mentor and the mentoree manager. If the guidelines of the program are clear, participants have been trained and successful mentoring agreements have been negotiated, a large number of the mentoring pairs will not need to use the services of the Mentoring Program Manager. However, for those pairs that are struggling, having a resource to go to can make the difference



between an opportunity to make changes and grow or a failure and derailment of the relationship.

In addition, it is best not to underestimate the power of having someone whose responsibility is to “check-in” with pairs to make sure they are working successfully. This simple reality can provide enough motivation for pairs to meet regularly and to focus on development as opposed to having social meetings.

Mentoree managers and mentors should have some communication about the relationship in the interest of maximizing the development of the mentoree.

This is a recommendation that has quite a seductive power because it seems to make so much sense. After all, both the manager and the mentor are interested in developing the employee/mentoree and the company would benefit from the shared efforts of both as a result of such interaction.

This may be true but that is not the purpose of a mentoring relationship. The primary purpose of a mentoring relationship is to provide a mentoree with a mentor who can create an environment for development devoid of the evaluative dimensions that exists between a manager and his/her employee. The mentoring relationship is a “neutral” area where risks can be taken without jeopardizing one’s immediate work situation. Once mentors and mentoree managers begin to dialogue, we have changed the mentoring relationship into one that is akin to being an assistant to the mentoree’s manager.

There are other objections that arise out of the course of designing, implementing and evaluating a mentoring program. I hope that the ones listed above have provided some insight into how to overcome them.

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