

Allerton Heneghan & O'Neill

WILL THE LIGHTS GO OUT FOR CORPORATE MENTORING PROGRAMS AFTER JACK WELCH RETIRES FROM GE?

Today's economy seems to be eroding what had been an unwavering corporate commitment to strong, internal mentoring programs. This Report to Clients examines that phenomenon and questions who will replace Welch as the champion for mentoring in corporate America.

“Virtually no one makes it to the top, and is successful there, without being mentored along the way.”

Although this feeling was expressed by CEOs and other key executive officers in many recent research studies, those at the top of major companies today are more concerned about current financial performance than yesterday's nostalgia.

As earnings-per-share take on more significance than promoted-from-within, the importance of mentoring programs diminishes. CEOs still support mentoring programs, but have less time available for paying more than lip service to that process today.

Where It All Began

In Greek Mythology, when King Odysseus went to fight the Trojan Wars, he asked an elderly counselor to develop his son, Telemachus, to be a king. The friend and teacher's name was Mentor.

What is Mentoring?

Traditionally, mentoring involves a veteran guiding and counseling a young comer, along with providing access and exposure to positions and assignments which allows desired management skills to develop. Mentoring has been called “an assisted evolution into eventual membership in senior management.”

Key factors in mentoring are that a reciprocal relationship must exist and both parties are willing to carve out the necessary time, said Don Allerton, a Partner in our firm. “The mentor has to see something in the protégé that catches his eye, something that reminds me of me,” Allerton said. “And the person who wants to be mentored has to demonstrate potential in order to attract the mentor. So organizational visibility is vital.”

Two Types of Mentoring

“Informal mentoring happens spontaneously and naturally, a chance meeting, getting exposed to the right person at the right time,” said Don Heneghan, an AHO Partner. He went on to say “Informal programs tend to be further down in the organization where there is little control. As a result, too many people fall through the cracks and don't receive the mentoring they need at the time it's needed most.”

In a formal program, mentor-protégé partners are carefully selected, individual goals are set and actions are measured. Formal programs tend to be driven by Human Resources departments and can often look like a forced exercise as opposed to a natural process, Heneghan said.

How Coaching and Mentoring Differ

Coaching, explains Don Wilson, an AHO Partner, helps executives become more effective business

leaders by providing them with the tools, knowledge and opportunities for self-development and sustained behavioral change. Wilson points out that coaching is more situational than mentoring, typically built around a single issue, usually of a shorter range. The coach always comes in from the outside.

Mentoring, by comparison, is more of a long-range effort, covers a variety of issues, and has to do with the other person's (protégé's) success. So it's more of an altruistic activity and a mentor is always an internal colleague, Wilson said.

Successful Mentor Profile

The best time for individuals to mentor is in their fifties when they're more interested in doing what Management Consultant John Fontana calls "legacy work" as opposed to "competitive work." At this point, an individual is more interested in furthering the institution rather than feathering his/her own nest.

Mentors emerge when there is generative leadership in an organization; when there's an altruistic tinge in individuals who, knowing they've topped out, stay on to share their wisdom. The question Fontana raises is, "Do today's cost conscious corporations value legacy work and altruism?"

Taking Mentoring's Pulse Today

There's probably more interest now in mentoring than there ever has been, and that's a function of the way our economy has been shifting. With the shortage of talented young people, many now demand mentoring as a perk to get a quick immersion into the new companies they are joining.

These same young people are playing important roles in reverse mentoring, a new concept where a person with highly developed technical skills (usually the computer) serves as an e-mentor for an executive. "When I have a young search candidate in the throes of indecision," said Don Heneghan, "I'll suggest to seek the advice of your mentor. Many of them," Heneghan continued, "don't have a mentor and end up relying on the advice of their peers. So I'm not sure there is as much mentoring in existence today as there was 10 to 15 years ago."

Increased corporate turnover has had an impact on mentoring. For example, questions arise when a protégé's mentor leaves the company, either for a better opportunity or is shown to the door as part of a downsizing. Do you follow the mentor or search for a new one?

A whole new set of mentoring questions will arise at companies that follow Bank of America's lead in outsourcing its human resources operations to a Web services provider in a sweeping cost-cutting effort.

Conclusion

For mentoring programs to be effective, it would take a powerful directive from a CEO to the company's senior executives and department heads to use mentoring as a succession planning tool.

But when we spoke to executives from a representative group of employers about mentoring programs, all agreed that formal programs weren't popular now and didn't seem worth the effort.

A few months ago, Karen Cates, assistant professor of organizational behavior at Northwestern's Kellogg Graduate School of Management, told *Fortune Magazine*, "Mentoring systems have mostly failed. Organizations are so lean that they don't have time for it. You're paid for what you produce, not for the time you spend developing people."

The lights aren't out yet, but they're flickering. And no one is stepping forward to carry mentoring's flag.