

# Mentoring: A New Model for Building Learning Organizations

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**F**or those organizations wishing to nurture and grow their talent, mentoring programs are nothing new. Be it an informal practice or a formal program, some type of mentoring activity takes place in nearly every organization. Protégés observe, question, and explore; mentors demonstrate, explain and model. Some employees link up with executives who share and facilitate; others never forge a relationship of value. Many organizations leave the mentoring relationship to chance. Others try to formalize it, forcing or recommending a multitude of relationships.

This article offers a new approach, one which builds on the inter-connectedness of some time-tested theories, as well as on some newer assumptions found in the literature on organizational learning. Based on the premise that our old mentoring program need rethinking, we recommend a new way of approaching mentoring that promises more systematic and substantial results.

## **Assumptions Up Front**

An underlying reason for the apparently random nature of mentoring seems to be the inability of many organizations to clearly define the assumptions they have about this subject. What notions do we have about people and organizations that underlie our mentoring efforts? What are the business drivers for it? And, what are the components that make for success? Finding the answers to these kinds of questions, for us, is the first step toward reducing randomness and anchoring mentoring in understood perceptions and values.

When we examined mentoring successes and failures, as well as theories about best practices, some important lessons emerged. These learnings are the building blocks we've used for reframing mentoring in a way that addresses past problems and enhances the learning opportunities (both individual and organizational) that are inherent in any mentoring effort.

Some of the more important building blocks we found are these:

- **Deliberate learning is the cornerstone.** The mentor's job is to promote intentional learning, which includes capacity building through methods such as instructing, coaching, providing experiences, modeling and advising.
- **Both failure and success are powerful teachers.** Mentors, as leaders of a learning experience, certainly need to share their "how to do it so it comes out right" stories. They also need to share their experiences of failure, i.e., "how I did it wrong". Both types of stories are powerful lessons that provide valuable opportunities for analyzing individual and organizational realities.
- **Leaders need to tell their stories.** Personal scenarios, anecdotes and case examples, because they offer valuable, often unforgettable insight, must be shared. Mentors who can talk about themselves and their experiences establish a rapport that makes them "learning leaders".
- **Development matures over time.** Mentoring — when it works — taps into continuous learning that is not an event, or even a string of discrete events. Rather, it is the synthesis of ongoing events, experiences, observations, studies, and thoughtful analyses.
- **Mentoring is a joint venture.** Successful mentoring means sharing responsibility for learning. Regardless of the facilities, the subject matter, the timing, and all other variables, successful mentoring begins with setting a contract for learning around which the mentor, the protégé, and their respective line managers are aligned.

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### Who's Minding the Mindset?

Operationalizing these learnings, of course, is another matter. In fact, for most organizations implementing these principles will require a shift in the collective mindset. It also will require building the capacity for organizational and individual learning.

In the past, the mindset for developing mentoring programs was reductionist. The issue of employee development was paired down until it settled into a one-on-one experience between mentor and protégé. The new mindset we're proposing requires expansionist thinking; a broadening and deepening of the issue so that mentoring encompasses groups of employees led by organizational veterans who themselves are tied together with the line managers responsible for the protégé's day-to-day supervision.

Expansionist thinking of this sort will position the mentor as a "learning leader". They won't be seen as a tutor, but rather as someone who works with a group of junior employees in ways that increases their learnings. In this regard, the mentor of the future will work with a learning group of about six employees, so that people who are peers (possibly across functional lines) can learn from each other as well as from their mentor-learning leader.

Protégés in the learning group will be those who are ready to learn from both the group and the learning leader, and they will be ready for the development assignments created to assist them in testing new ideas and insights in practice. They also will be "high per-

forming learners", people whose capacity and potential enables them to grow through a learning group experience.

A crucial new component in our model is the "development-minded manager" who has ongoing responsibility for the employee. This type of manager is necessary to complete the network of human resources whose commitment to learning — individual and organizational — is vital to creating this new mentoring process. With the inclusion of employees, their managers, and veteran organizational executives, the mentoring effort moves toward a systems approach to learning.

**Senior and Seasoned:  
The Mentor/Learning Leader**

The ideal mentor/learning leader is someone who is a senior on a technical or management track, preferably someone from the general manager or director level, and someone who also is concerned with their own learning, the learning of others, and the future of the organization.

The experience which the learning leader brings to the learning group needs to be both broad (encompassing a variety of organizational settings) and deep (encompassing a variety of organizational levels). This allows for insight built from having "been there."

Specific components of the ideal learning leader's track record include:

- Success in one's field
- Contact with a wide network of individuals

- Vast accumulated experience
- Substantial personal or positional power, or both
- A history of fostering development of employees
- Control of substantial resources
- Broad organization knowledge
- Success in managing teams
- A reputation for technical or functional competence

In addition, a number of personal attributes serve the mentoring/learning leader well.

- An ease in being in groups.
- An incisive and quick mind, one which allows the learning leader to cut to the heart of discussions
- The ability to help a group reach the essence of an issue rather than skate along the edge of it
- An emotional openness which prompts speaking from the heart, as well as the head,
- An ability to share with the group in a manner that is viewed as caring and candid
- A sense of humor that enables the learning leader to set a lighter context when relating past experiences that may have seemed devastating at one time.

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At times, however, the learning leader will need to be a skilled socratic teacher who can question and prod individuals in the group to consider instances and issues and arrive at their own conclusions.

Storytelling is a crucial learning leader skill. For this, the leader needs to be able to "tell it-like-it-is" when it comes to the behind-the-scenes aspects of organization decision making. This they do by sharing their own personal feelings as the tale is artfully spun. For

junior employees, each story is an important example. A skilled storyteller can recount experiences in a way that offers up the best example for illuminating an issue at hand.

Sensitivity to diversity also is crucial for learning leaders. On occasion, they undoubtedly will be from very different backgrounds than some of their group members. They will need to approach issues of diversity with candor and understanding, when differences related to gender, race and/or ethnicity might be an issue within the group or in group members' understanding of the organization.

Last, the learning leader needs to be able to pass on an appreciation for paradox that comes from being a savvy insider. Life — inside and outside of organizations — is neither rational nor formula-driven. Often it is not even goal-driven. It is full of competing and conflicting demands. Consequently, as we learn more, we may not know more at all. This kind of awareness and acknowledgment can help more junior people to deal with the ambiguity that prevails just when they thought they "got it!"

**Functions**

At base, the crucial shift our model offers is this: In the new mentoring model, learning leaders are partners rather than patriarchs. As experienced organizational veterans with information and knowledge to offer, our members act as facilitators of group learning and guides for group growth.

In particular, the functions of our learning mentors fall into five categories: guide, ally, catalyst, savvy

insider, and advocate.

**Guide.** By definition, a guide shows the way. He or she never is so far ahead that their followers lose sight of him or her. The guide leads by pointing to opportunities and pitfalls. In no way do they make the individual's decisions.

In the guide function, the learning leader may act as a coach. As coach, the learning leader draws on his or her strategic view of the organization to help others reflect on their attitudes, skills and patterns of behavior as they develop in their current position and their careers.

The effective guide, in part, is a Socratic teacher. Such teaching is particularly popular in law schools. The key is to ask questions that challenge group members to think, analyze, and probe for meaning. The learning leaders encourages, first by probing for group members' thoughts and then by leading them to their own ideas and conclusions. As a result, the group learns how to learn from experience.

**Ally.** An honest ally is essential for a protégé's growth. An ally should be able to appraise behaviors and to demonstrate how others perceive them. When the learning leader acts as ally, individual members of a mentoring group gain a clear view of their strengths and weaknesses.

One function of the ally is as a sounding board. This means listening actively, empathetically, and intelligently. A sounding board provides a risk-free environment for those who want to vent frustrations, share difficulties, and seek out other perspectives.

An ally is a straight talker. This is a highly caring

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role, but it is rarely an easy one to fill. The straight talker is neither critic nor judge, but is a candid and honest friend. This role requires the learning leader to provide specific feedback and personal impressions — favorable and unfavorable — to support an individual's personal growth. Most people never have the opportunity to receive that kind of feedback.

**Catalyst.** A catalyst is the outside force that inspires action. The leader who acts as a catalyst typically says, does, or demonstrates something that becomes the spark to ignite their protégé's initiative.

As a catalyst, the learning leader helps the group see in a new light a vision of the organization and of their futures. She or he helps them look at unanticipated possibilities that they can make happen — rather than concentrating only on what they expect to happen. The catalyst can also be a creative motivator. He or she focuses on stimulating group members to discuss impressions, ideas, visions, and creative concepts that are outside the context of their current work.

**Savvy Insider.** The learning leader is someone who has been around long enough to have "intuitive" knowledge of how things really get accomplished in the organization. She or he knows which avenues really are available for achieving individual goals.

As savvy insider, the learning leader acts as a connector — a kind of a broker who links their protégés with people in the organization who can enhance their learning. The savvy insider is also an information provider. Informal organizational information that comes from an insider's experience helps protégés check the reality of their own perceptions, goals, and plans.

**Advocate.** As group members learn, they begin to see themselves as empowered to propel their own growth and develop their own plans. As they work through that process, the learning leader can help by creating opportunities for specific learning experiences.

One way the learning leader can carry out the advocate function is to champion the ideas and interests of his or her protégés so that the group members gain visibility and exposure. The learning leader is in a good position to capture others' attention and can often do it effectively to benefit group members. Similarly, the advocate functions as a powerful voice. In this role, the learning leader brings group ideas to the people in the organization who have the authority to implement them.

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### **Protégé Activities — Partners in Empowerment**

**Group Composition.** The ideal learning group is comprised of five to seven "high performing learners." These are protégés who have a bright future because they are seen as making important contributions to the organization now and in the future. Typically, their names already are found on succession and continuity planning lists. They have expertise — be it technical or managerial — the organization does not want to lose.

In selecting high performing protégés for a learning group, it is important to consider the interaction and synthesis of the group as a whole. Diversity — among position levels, functions, gender, race, and career goals — serves several purposes. First, a di-

verse learning group creates a singular opportunity for group members to learn the perspectives of different positions and areas of the organization. Second, it establishes an occasion to build an ongoing peer network that encompasses people who are in contact with a rich variety of organizational sub units and functional work areas. Third, with particular regard to a mix of race and gender, valuable interaction is more likely when everyone in the group does not think alike. Gaining an understanding of different perspectives is as vital to the development of group members as is gaining an understanding of the organization's funding. An important caveat to note, however, is that the diversity objective in a small group generally can be achieved only through deliberate selection. The outcome is not left to chance; it is contrived. This needs to be recognized up front.

### Starting A Group

How do protégé learning groups get going? And how do they really work?

To start a group, prospective mentors need preparatory training about roles and responsibilities. They need to learn where they "fit" in the organizational lives of their protégés — in relation to others in the group and in relation to the protégés immediate managers. Additionally, most learning leaders need some encouragement and practice in the area of storytelling before they can pass on their own experiences in a way that is open, reflective, and "learningful."

They also need to learn about the concept of dialogue as a way to interact in group meetings. In par-

ticular, they need to understand the difference between dialogue and discussion, both of which will be prevalent in learning groups. Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), has studied the differ-

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ences. Dialogue, he says, is "the capacity of members... to suspend assumptions and enter into genuine 'thinking together.'" The goal of discussion, on the other hand, is to make a decision.

Mentoring groups need dialogue because it sparks the creative and free-flowing thought that allows them to share insights and search for meaning. Dialogue goes beyond any one group member's understanding. According to

Senge, dialogue produces learning when a group begins to see how organizational interactions can undermine people's capacity for breakthrough thinking. A learning group seeks the kind of creativity that dialogue can inspire.

Through the dialogue process, and other group activities that are part of the new mentoring model, mentors learn how to learn from experience. They may be from different areas within an organization. They may not be working toward the same goals on the job. But, when they come together as a group, each protégé must be encouraged to the enhanced thinking that the dialogue process brings about.

Together — with the guidance of the learning leader — group members explore relevant issues and share ideas and experiences. In the process, they increase their capacity for innovative thinking. They do not make decisions.

A learning group typically meets together with the

learning leader once a month for several hours; again it is important to think in terms of expansion rather than reduction. The learning group agenda is one that is free form and can accommodate any number of topics or concerns. Its process also is free form, in that dialogue and direction can be initiated by anyone in the group. The leader and members share responsibility for the learning every step of the way.

The learning leader is bound to have some qualms about heading a group where format and agenda have little place. After all, learning leaders are people who are accustomed to groups that are problem-driven and task-oriented. They are comfortable in situations where they are responsible for making something specific happen. The idea of shared responsibility for learning moves away from the familiar patriarchal model of relationships to a peer model; and its direction may seem haphazard and vague. Learning leaders need to be convinced that dialogue — a chance to meander, tell stories, exchange concerns and discuss beliefs — has legitimacy and value. And, that dialogue takes one to a higher level of thinking.

For those who have participated as Learning Leaders, this has been eye opening for them. A strength of one-on-one mentoring has been its ability to address individual needs and thoughts as they evolve, in a free-flowing manner with not set agenda or plan. Through dialogue, this continues to be a strength of learning groups.

Empowerment doesn't just happen without help. Groups don't "cleave" without time. Learning Group Members need to make time available for the learning group (without the learning leader) to pull together

and identify it's agenda. This is essential in launching and structuring a successful program. Without this independent time, groups can fall back into the "you tell us" mode of operations that is the antithesis of this model.

**Protégés Back on the Job:  
The Trench Connection**

It is all too natural for learning group members to slip into a mentality that says, "For these few hours I discuss neat things with interesting people, but then, I go back to my real job." The temptation is to separate the learning group's dialogue from day-to-day work. However, if the learning group is aimed at nurturing the development of its individual participants, each of them need to be experimenting back on the job in ways that link their group dialogues with their work experiences. The fact is, the real learning begins when the protégés go back to their jobs and take on new challenges. It continues when they return to discuss the meaning of those experiences.

Participants in learning groups have no problem finding challenging new opportunities on the job, and now they have a place to converse about what those opportunities are teaching them. Again, however, a key to the group mentoring process is making the learning deliberate — in this case asking group participants to take on specific development assignments that give them growth opportunities in their workplaces. In this context, three types of assignments should be available:

1. Platform Assignments. These are assignments

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that allow group members to tryout parts of other jobs — through temporary assignments or short term projects — in order to experience a range of competencies.

2. **On-the-job Assignments.** These are assignments that enable group members to try out new skills and responsibilities while remaining in their current position.
3. **Dedicated Assignments.** These are assignments by which group members are reassigned to a different area of the organization where they will get new exposure and experience.

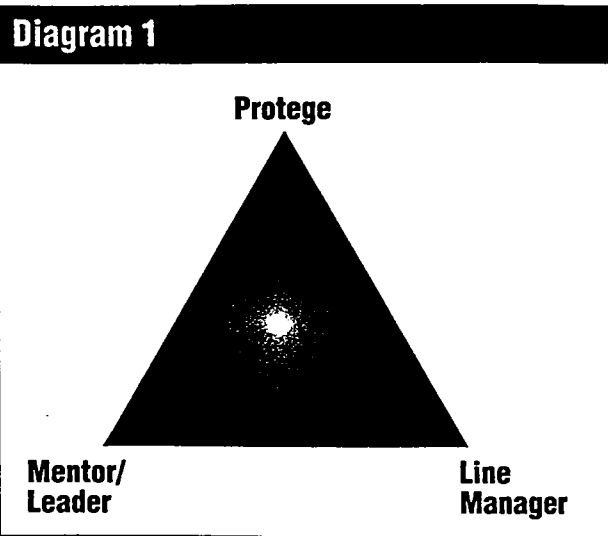
No matter the assignment type, each protégé must be accountable for the work being done. They must live by and with the consequences that go with that responsibility and challenge. In this, the learning leader plays the role of advocate for experimentation.

### The Role of Line Managers

Since learning group activities go far beyond what happens in regular group meetings, it is crucial for the line managers of participating protégés to be committed to the success of the process and prepared to assist in a variety of ways.

Without question, a 1/2 to 2 day orientation of these managers is advisable. In this orientation, line managers should be led through a number of activities to teach them how to help their employees think through the creation of development assignments. They also should explore, in depth, their roles in facilitating development conversations and providing honest feedback.

Whatever the training, it should produce a more "development minded" line manager, someone who is able to be the crucial third component in our new



mentoring paradigm. Line managers are essential, ensuring the learning process by encouraging on-the-job exploration while also monitoring continued responsibility for performance. These managers fulfill a stewardship role in terms of day-to-day direct authority and capacity building, while learning leaders provide a broader and longer view that creates a window to the future for high performing learners. Diagram 1 illustrates our triad, and it's essential interconnectedness.

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Among the line managers more important responsibilities in our new model are:

1. Providing personal feedback to learners concerning the values and mindsets they may be defining during group meetings;
2. Cultivating individual abilities both for the current job and for future opportunities;
3. Supporting and designing learning assignments in partnership with the learning leader and the protégé;
4. Endorsing experimentation in a way that applauds new approaches and permits the possibility of mistakes;

