

Energizing Employees With Mentoring: They Keep Staying, and Staying, and Staying...

by Margo Murray

As organizations seek ways to more aggressively cut costs and increase global competitiveness, it becomes increasingly important to establish and sustain high levels of employee performance. Every experienced performance technologist would say that we do that by setting clear standards and expectations, providing all needed tools and resources, removing any potential obstacles, allowing employees to make necessary decisions, enabling them with the requisite knowledge and skills, and providing timely and relevant feedback. The reality is that in most fast-paced, rapidly changing organizations, few managers and supervisors are spending the time to provide this type of input and feedback to employees.

Many managers are still promoted on the basis of technical or professional skills and are rarely provided opportunities to acquire the different set of skills needed to perform the unfamiliar tasks involved in getting work done through other people. To further exacerbate such performance

deficiencies, these new managers are operating in lean, flat organizations with more and more people under their supervision. It is not surprising that they avoid the critical tasks of performance planning and appraisals. While few people can reach peak performance without guided planning and timely feedback, new managers who are struggling to give the desired attention to planning today's tasks are much less likely to display the motivation to invest in career planning and guidance. First, they often don't have the skills to perform these tasks. Second, with 20 or 30 people reporting to them, they may truly feel they do not have the time to interact with each individual. Lacking both competence and confidence, they frequently abdicate managerial responsibility.

If employees' perception of management's commitment to their growth is a key to recruiting and retaining the right people, and if unprepared managers continue to be promoted in most organizations, is there some strategy that can positively affect this cycle of inadequate performance?

Based on more than 30 years of experience, let me suggest two strategies. One is to charge all employees with as much individual responsibility as they are capable of handling, and are willing to take. This must include both responsibility for today's performance and contribution(s) to the organization's results, and responsibility for growth and development of the skills needed for career resiliency in the workplace of tomorrow. Performers are energized by clear responsibility.

The second strategy is to facilitate pairing employees with a series of mentors who can transfer experience, skills, and work behaviors. A mentor can ignite the motivation to upgrade competencies and sustain higher levels of performance.

Mentoring Concept Background

The principles and practices of modeling and mentoring have been key elements in the continuity of art, craft, and commerce from ancient times. In the arts and crafts guilds, a young person was apprenticed to a master, who was considered to be excellent in the trade or profession (Murray, 1991). The master taught, coached, and guided the practice and gave feedback to the apprentice to enhance development of skills in the trade or art. To become a master, the apprentice's skills were judged from a work sample, such as a piece of silverware, a painting, or even a horseshoe. The word *masterpiece* originated from this sample of skillful work. Today we might call this the criterion test of mastery of the skill.

The skills required of the new masters in many businesses and professions today are as different from those of the apprentices of yore as the high-tech clean room is from the village blacksmith shop. Yet the process by which the skills are learned is very much the same. Certainly mastering an art, craft, or profession increases one's marketability in diverse workplaces. This flexibility is essential in a world in which U.S. workers will have an average of seven different jobs in their work lives.

In addition to the benefits to the individual, many organizations are now realizing the cost-effectiveness of mentoring and coaching in the transfer of technical and professional, as well as generic skills. With leaner, flatter organizations it becomes increasingly important to determine the core competencies required to stay competitive. In their studies of organizational renewal McCarthy and Millen acknowledge that "...cutting people alone is inadequate..." to improve the bottom-line (1994). During downsizing or rightsizing, there is a great risk of serious skill drain when experienced people are let go. Having a facilitated mentoring process that systematically transfers the requisite skills and experiences to those who will remain in the organization can stem this outflow.

The imminent retirements of an aging workforce threaten to further reduce the skill and experience base of mature organizations. Results will be diminished by the loss of investment in intellectual capital when these employees say goodbye.

Myth and Reality

No longer is the mentor just an older, more experienced, senior manager who chooses to be a benevolent adviser to others. Today mentors may very well be younger, and with less time in the organization. They may have been hired with exceptional professional or technical skills needed to compete in new markets or to provide innovative services. Or the mentoring relationship may be designed to transfer skills of peer specialists to each other—to enable both people to upgrade a combination of competencies. Recent research in why organizations are implementing mentoring processes illustrates the increasing value employers are placing on career development.

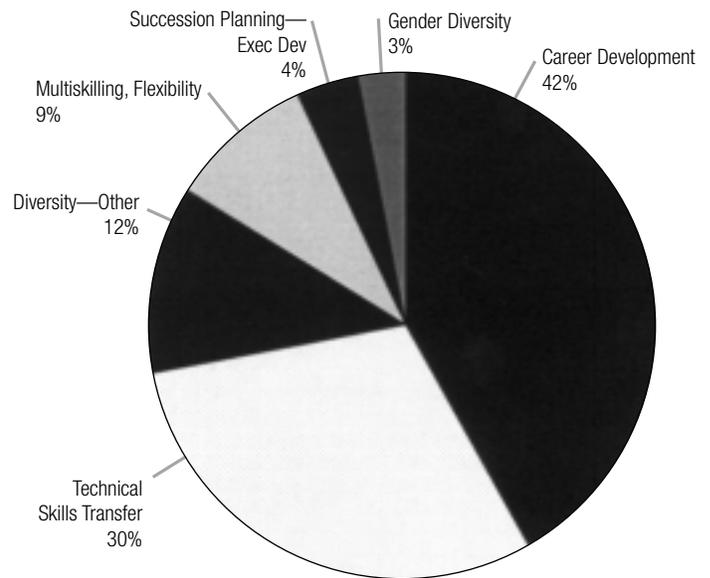


Figure 1. Mentoring Process Drivers.

Forty-two percent of the 636 pairs in Figure 1 were matched to enhance the career development of the protégés. Almost one-third were matched for upgrading technical skills. With a closer look, we found that the emphasis on career development was expected to result in improved retention of good people. Another anticipated outcome was to improve recruitment and acceptance of job offers. Some retirees have volunteered to be mentors, maintaining contact with people in an organization where they had liked working, as well as contributing to its continued success. Their motivation may be enhanced by the fact that part of their retirement benefits are coming from company stock.

Some inexperienced and unskilled managers may view the involvement of mentors with their subordinates as an opportunity to abdicate their responsibility for development of their own people. It is unrealistic to think that any one person can develop all the competencies in the myriad of skills required to produce results in any organization. On the other hand, it is both realistic and practical for managers to view mentors as allies. The two can collaborate on the development of employees as an investment in the human assets of the organization for the success of all. The manager and the mentor may have very different skill sets and experiences. Development planning can be a powerful, dynamic process with all three primary participants focusing on the growth potential of the protégé. Managers and mentors will bring their diverse skills, experiences, and work styles to this development-planning process, and the synergy of the three produces far greater results than can be achieved in isolation or as adversaries.

Managers will ask, “Why make it formal? Can’t people find their own mentor like I did?” The answer is that without assistance only the fortunate few will find a mentor with the skills and experiences that can fill the perceived gaps. Facilitated mentoring can be elegantly simple and not bureaucratic (see Figure 2).

What Are the Best Practices?

Many organizations have now implemented a facilitated mentoring process and are reaping measured results. Here are some selected examples:

- Aerospace—creating a multiskilled workforce
- Banking—decreasing time needed to master customer service skills
- Community foundation—enabling former welfare recipients to get and keep jobs
- Computer manufacture, sales, and service—crosstraining hardware and software specialists
- Courts—career guidance for both professional and support personnel
- Education—K–12, secondary, and higher education supporting study habits, degree design, and transition to the workplace
- Food product manufacture—development of management skills for multiple functions
- Hospitality—grooming candidates for hotel management

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS	INFORMAL MENTORING	FACILITATED MENTORING
Linked to business goals	Mentoring not tied to goals; relationships not tracked	Linked to existing business initiatives; results are measured
Internal ownership of program	Ownership unclear; little support or coordination	Supported by project coordinator(s) who are skilled in communication, negotiation, mediation, and evaluation
Aimed at developing protégé’s skills and behaviors	Often more generalized relationship; less specific focus	Focused on skill development and transfer of experience; also linked to individual development plan
Comprehensive orientation of protégés and mentors	No orientation; Generic training--not linked to specific needs of pairs	Comprehensive orientation to focus on roles, key success factors, mentoring process, and goals
Ongoing support for mentoring pairs	No structured support	FMP coordinators facilitate, mediate, and provide resources as needed
Results are measured	Little or no followup; mostly anecdotal data	Baselines established during needs assessment; periodic evaluations measure results; results are linked to business goals

Figure 2. Comparison of Informal and Facilitated Mentoring Relevant to Key Success Factors (Summarized by Kathleen Robinson).

Why Implement Mentoring During Tough Times?

In today’s lean (and sometimes mean!) organizations, no program will be supported and stay in place unless it directly supports a goal or specific needs of the organization. There are many more reasons than costly litigation to make the growth and development of people a high priority. You only need to look as far as the bottom line—and every organization has one, including nonprofits—to find a good reason to facilitate the pursuit of mastery performance. For example, Figure 3 is from a recent doctoral dissertation that revealed the enormous costs of replacing an entry-level engineer in high-tech organizations (Melnarik, 1998).

Here are some of the reasons to implement facilitated mentoring processes during lean times:

- To make sure we are retaining the right people as we *rightsizes*
- To attract and recruit people with the skills and experience tomorrow demands
- To improve retention by making our experienced and skilled people feel more valued
- To increase the likelihood that we will survive with global competition
- To improve results—profit or other—with people who are more competent, confident, experienced, and motivated
- To ensure representation of diverse groups at all levels of the organization
- To enable our people to learn to work with others with different education, ages, cultures, physical abilities, etc.
- To improve communication across functional and divisional lines

ITEM	ESTIMATED COSTS
HR time to coordinate interviews, screen 40 candidates	\$5,000
Recruiting consultant fee	\$25,000
Interviewing time (4 interviewers) x (5 interviewees) x (2.5 hr/interview)	\$3,000
Lost productivity of interviewers due to recruiting activities	\$13,000
Hire-on bonus + difference between old and new salary for one year	\$30,000
Lost productivity while engineer's position is not filled (5 months)	\$217,000
Lost productivity due to training and startup time (6 months)	\$260,000
Lost productivity of other workers due to missing engineer	\$24,000
Total cost of replacing one engineer	\$577,000

Figure 3. Costs Associated with the Loss and Replacement of Entry-Level Engineer

(Source: Melnarik, 1998).

What Skills Are Being Mastered?

Here are examples of the types of skills being transferred today with facilitated mentoring processes in four well-known organizations. The job title of the protégé is listed along with the specific growth objectives stated in the development or mentoring action plan (Murray, 1998).

- Capital Projects Accountant—acquire trade relations experiences and purchasing skills
- Commodity Manager—improve people skills, exposure and awareness to upper management activities, courage
- Copy Center Manager—develop presentation skills using multilingual capabilities
- Electrical Design Engineer—develop finance and business proposals
- International Trade Specialist—improve drive strength, time-management skills
- Market Development Manager—strengthen sales skills; improve balance between standing up for own rights and being more flexible
- Personnel Relations Manager—improve skills with cost side; compensation and benefits
- Project Coordinator—learn structure of the organization; gain job opportunities; develop skills with project management
- Quality Program Manager—develop task-oriented approach to total quality management
- Technical Services Center Representative—prioritize career goals, articulate and quantify ministeps to take to get to the long-term goal
- Territory Representative—develop skills with handling customer visits
- Warehouse Supervisor—learn company policies and procedures

Results

There are some significant and exciting outcomes of facilitated mentoring relationships. The impact on performance

improvement in work environments as a result of the mentoring experiences is remarkable. When people become more competent, knowledgeable, and confident, they contribute more to the bottom-line results of the organization. Multiskilled, flexible people add greater value to downsized, leaner, flatter organizations. They can move across functions and work with different technologies and are more open to learning new tasks. Further, they are more loyal to the organization and more likely to sustain

their own motivation and to support necessary changes when they have a broad range of experiences and are empowered to make decisions about their own career choices and development strategies.

How do we know that mentoring has an impact on the bottom line? In the International Society for Performance Improvement we often hear, “What you measure is what you get.” Successful organizations are designing evaluation strategies to measure the impact of the mentoring participants’ experiences on the organizations’ results, as well as the skills and experience levels of the protégés and the mentors. Figure 4 is an example of measured gains in a skills assessment of salespeople in mentoring relationships.

Here are some of the other measured results seen from facilitated mentoring processes in a variety of organizations:



What defines your mastery?

My innovation of the concept of facilitated mentoring, with dogged pursuit of research and best practices, has resulted in my pre-eminence in this work. Mastery comes from learning, practice, and upgrading skills with coaching and feedback. Rather than advise, I try to model Margo’s Maxims:

- Push back, at least twice.
- Live within your values.
- Get close lead.
- If it is to be, it’s up to me.
- Be good—master your craft.
- Walk to meet your luck.

I believe and behave: “Be a mentor—pass it on, to those who reach out to me.”

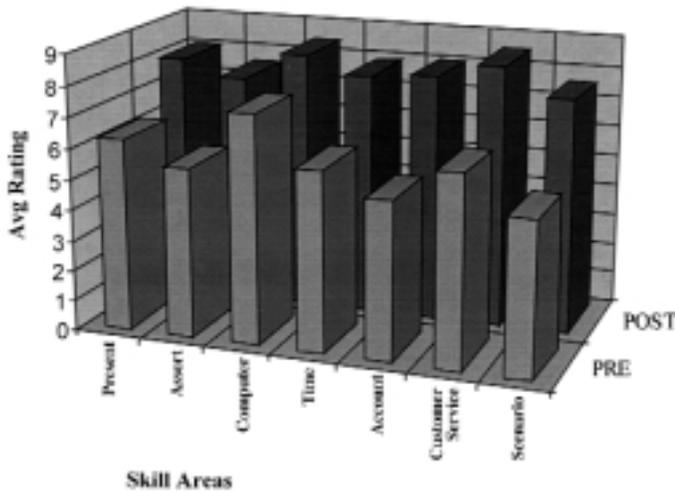


Figure 4. Pre/Post Capability Ratings by Coaches.

- Increased awareness by managers of the caliber of employees, their core competencies, and the available talent pool
- Higher ratings on evaluations of supervisors by subordinates
- Increased number of cross-functional transfers
- Gains in 9 of 11 generic career and life-effectiveness skills after 13 months
- Greater knowledge of the organization and all functions
- Increased retention of the best and brightest people

The ideal evaluation plan will track systemic results gathered before and after the intervention. The richest and simplest source of data on added value is the protégé development plan. Anecdotal data may be gathered in focus groups and experience exchanges. In such a forum the participants will tell how they got charged up and turned on with the mentoring experience. During times of rapid change in organizations, this process gives employees an element of stability—an anchor. Mentors can help their partners see beyond the immediate uncertainty. People are more likely to stay with you when they see longer-term opportunities.

The key success factors that mentoring pairs cite as having an impact on their relationship run the gamut. Recent evaluation focus groups have provided the following examples:

- “...Honesty in our discussions; openness; feedback to each other.”
- “We established what our expectations were in advance; we set objectives and met them.”
- “Despite distance between our [work] sites, we kept in touch via telephone and email, and got together when [we were] in the same area.”
- “We made it a priority to put our meetings on the calendar and to meet on a regular basis.”
- “...Expertise and thorough knowledge of the field.”
- “I learn as much as he does [from a mentor]!”

Conclusion

Results from facilitated mentoring processes are not accidental. The key to assurance of continuity of the mentoring process, and desired results, is to closely link it to the mission, goals, and priority strategies of the organization. Critical success factors for a mentoring process are listed in Figure 5.

- Identification of need, goal, opportunity, readiness
- Planning and design
- Communication
- Matching, agreements
- Orientation/training
- Development plans = healthy relationships
- Evaluation

Figure 5. Keys to Successful Mentoring Process.

Separate *programs* are extremely vulnerable to economic downturns, budget cuts, and changes of affection. Only an integrated, facilitated process, which is linked to current and future mission or business imperatives, can be expected to stand the buffeting of the winds of change. These rapidly changing environments demand multiskilled, flexible workers—and mastery levels of core competencies in all employees to improve performance, produce results, and sustain the organization itself. 🌟

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