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How to be a great mentoring programme co-ordinator

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How to be a great mentoring programme co-ordinator

Coordinators are the largely unsung heroes of mentoring programmes. They promote the programme to participants and corporate sponsors; protect it from the destructive forces of sudden economies and changes of management fashion; and maintain the quality of the programme, often on limited budgets.

Great mentoring coordinators always have remarkable reserves of enthusiasm, both for the concept of mentoring, for the wider notion of developing others and for the organisations in which they work. They are widely networked within the organisation – known and respected across all levels and functional silos. Although most are also highly effective coaches and mentors themselves, this is not always the case – some of the most effective coordinators have recognised their own limitations in this respect and chosen to focus on making mentoring happen, rather than personally being a role model for one-to-one developmental behaviours.

So what does the effective programme coordinator do? Among the key functions are the following:

1. **Make the business case for mentoring:** Along with their enthusiasm, effective coordinators bring a strong sense of the pragmatic. They identify where mentoring will add most value to the organisation by helping to solve thorny business issues and they build a solid argument around how it will do so. They are not afraid to attach both hard and soft measures to the business case. Wherever possible, they engage top management in discussion, to ensure that they are fully supportive and that they understand at both intellectual and emotional levels what a difference the programme will make.
2. **Create a cadre of enthusiastic and active supporters:** Support from top management helps to give the programme prominence and shape, but only rarely do the business leaders spend substantial amounts of time on the programme. For that, the coordinator needs an active steering group of enthusiasts, who will take responsibility for assisting with the programme and a network of influencers, who will promote it passively. Both of these can be drawn from groups specifically targeted by the mentoring programme, but there is also much to be gained from widening out the involvement to an organisation-wide constituency, especially if the programme is a pilot for mentoring in general. The steering group members not only attend the same training as mentors and/or mentees, but are also encouraged to continue to learn about mentoring and coaching.



3. Market the programme to participants: Even when pushing at an open door, effective coordinators recognise the need to align expectations of both participants and other stakeholders, such as line managers, with the reality of the programme design and what mentoring can and cannot (or should not) do. They arrange ‘lunch ‘n learn’ sessions, distribute short newsletters and hold endless conversations to educate people and to encourage mentors and mentees to come forward. Even in large programmes, dedicated coordinators target people they think should participate and give the special encouragement to do so.
4. Install robust systems: Whether a programme is for five pairs or five hundred, they ensure that people can register easily, have the information and guidance to select an appropriate partner, are supported throughout the programme and receive the training they need for their respective roles. They also ensure that the measurement process gathers valid data from a high proportion, if not from all, participants and that its results are used both to improve programme effectiveness and to motivate stakeholders.
5. Remain in touch with the programme undercurrents: They use all the resources they have at their disposal – formal measures, information and impressions from sponsors and steering group members, and frequent casual conversations with participants – to monitor the health of the programme and the individual relationships within it. They may, in some cases, become almost a second mentor, although they are highly conscious of the need not to intrude into the relationships. They use this data to inform the content and design of further training and review sessions for mentors and mentees; and to counter any signs of “relationship droop” (the point in some mentoring relationships, where one or both parties backs off, fearing that they are imposing too much on the other).
6. Benchmark against other organisations: Even before the International Standards for Mentoring Programmes in Employment provided a method of direct comparison against mentoring relationship dynamics in other organisations, effective coordinators sought out opportunities to benchmark their programme. They made peer visits to companies with programmes targeted at similar groups (for example, mentoring as part of graduate recruitment programmes); they attended conferences where there were case studies of other organisations to discuss and dissect; and they developed peer networks with other coordinators. All of these activities are still very useful in keeping a programme in good shape and ensuring it delivers the maximum benefits for both participants and the organisation.



7. Plan for their succession: Running a successful mentoring programme is often a significant stepping-stone in their own career. It brings people to top management notice in positive ways that may not have been obvious before. As a result, there is a trend for them to move on to other, larger assignments, or be head-hunted by other organisations, or take a career shift to become full-time executive coaches and/or mentors. Preparing one or more strong successors is important in making sure the programme will continue and will thrive.

The role of mentoring programme isn't easy. It demands a lot of attention to the big picture and to the detail, both at the same time. Yet I have never met an effective programme coordinator, who had any doubts about this being one of the most satisfying and personally fulfilling work roles they had undertaken.