

Chicago Tribune

Some Words Of Wisdom: Get A Mentor And For Companies: Get With The Program

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Special to the *Chicago Tribune*
Published January 9, 2002

When Adrienne Baker got her first job out of college, no one bothered to show her the ropes. Fortunately, she later met a human resources coordinator, who took the time to advise her about the company's corporate culture and her colleagues' skills.

"I watched and listened to him, and he watched out for me. He was caring and compassionate. Through him I wound up in the human resources field and moved to Chicago," said Baker, now 33 and a human resources director at CNA Surety Corp.

Marika Flatt, 27, national media director at Phenix & Phenix, a literary publicity firm in Austin, Texas, has seen the advantages of mentoring from the flip side. As head of the company's media team, she has found it crucial to advise her publicists. "Only one had experience in the field, so it was important for me to direct them," she said.

Named for Mentor, the loyal friend and adviser of Greek hero Odysseus, the word now commonly refers to a wise, loyal adviser or coach, according to Webster's New World Dictionary.

In the past, mentors often were the heads of a company who focused on their best and brightest, so they could groom them as replacements. Those getting such a nod often mirrored their mentors. They came from the same socioeconomic, ethnic, religious and academic backgrounds.

Today, with the global economy demanding a more diversified workforce and loyalty sometimes non-existent, corporate heads know they need to train and nurture employees throughout an organization rather than just at the top.

"Everyone working in an organization has the right to be mentored," said Shirley Peddy, a

management consultant and author of "The Art of Mentoring: Lead, Follow & Get Out of the Way" (Bullion books, \$16.95).

Other goals of mentoring are to convince everyone on staff to strive for the top, particularly minorities and women who once felt excluded, and to speed the learning cycle."

"With mentoring, you learn to work harder and smarter and figure out things better," said Susan Key, an associate professor and co-director of the Ph.D. program at the University of Alabama's School of Business. "[Companies] also cut costs by not having to rehire as frequently."

To meet these challenges, many companies are trying to get more leaders to become mentors and get employees to seek them out.

What makes a good mentor? Emotional intelligence; intuition; leadership potential; an ability to keep learning, including from a mentee; a commitment to an organization; and a desire to bring about change, says Jeffrey Patnaude, author of "Leading from the Maze" (Ten Speed Press, \$17.95).

What makes a good mentee? Someone who seeks advice but doesn't overburden a mentor and who can mentor their mentors, Key said. "We know from communication audits that information circulating at the bottom and middle of an organization often doesn't get to the top, but it should be a two-way street."

The pairing should depend on mutual interest, an ability to trust, be honest, remain confidential and provide feedback, says Sandra J. Bishop, president of a coaching firm, Executive Solutions in Chicago. But, the relationship should never become so confining. "Mentors shouldn't become too controlling; mentees shouldn't become overly reliant," Flatt added.

Debate remains whether the process should be institutionalized or informal and how pairings should

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be made. Jon Katzenbach, author of "Peak Performance" (Harvard Business School Press, \$29.95), thinks it may work best when the two sides have worked together. "It's hard to advise someone in the abstract. It also becomes easier to build trust when it evolves from real work together," he said.

Chicago clinical psychologist and consultant Laurie Anderson thinks either approach can work and that it should depend on the purpose behind the mentoring.

Les McKeown, president and CEO of Deliver the Promise, a consulting firm in San Francisco, agrees. "If you are a senior vice president of marketing and sales who plans to retire in a few years, you might want a formal process to transfer information to a successor," he said.

The company's approach to mentoring has worked well. Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a human relations consulting firm, has a formal program based on volunteering. Bill Miner, a retirement practice leader in the company's Chicago office, was paired with Amy Alexander in its Cleveland office. They talk regularly, get together periodically, and e-mail occasionally.

Miner sought mentoring as part of a way to enhance his performance development. Alexander wanted to focus on doing more outside consulting and felt she needed to improve her presentation skills. "Bill gives me a different perspective. What we do is confidential," she said.

What is equally important is that company leadership believes deeply in mentoring's strengths. They can do so by communicating this belief directly, said Laurel Bellows, a partner in the Chicago law firm Bellows & Bellows, who negotiates employment contracts and severance packages. "Mentoring is critical to retain people so they feel they have support to succeed. They need to develop skills and find a path through a corporation's maze," she said.

Companies can tout successes by rewarding those who have mentored in front of others and can print up success stories in corporate newsletters, says Peddy. They can also make mentoring part of a person's performance review and monitor results based on objectives set, says John DiFrances, an executive adviser in Milwaukee.

In addition to debating how mentoring is structured, many think it wise to have multiple

mentors throughout the course of a career. Baker found different mentors offered different learning experiences. A Hispanic, she found one mentor who was a top-ranking Hispanic woman at a company she worked for and used her as a role model. "As a woman and minority, I found it important to have someone who can help navigate the politics of corporate America since it's easy to make mistakes."

Bellows, the lawyer, also believes that having a mentor from a similar background and someone from outside your organization allows candid talk. Yet, she and others say that having someone different helps a person see outside the proverbial box.

Because of so many changes, some companies find they need help to navigate the new terrain with outside experts. A host of options have emerged.

Ali Corbett, director of healthcare for U.S. Foodservice, a distribution company in Deerfield, recently signed up for a formal mentoring program that links mentees to professionals in the business world outside their company. She learned about mentoring through INROADS, which recruits minority talent to corporate America. Many of the interns eventually go to work for their sponsoring companies.

Even hospitals look to mentor their physicians as the healthcare field has become more business oriented. In-Patient Physicians-The Hospitalist Co. in Hollywood, Calif., which has an office in Hinsdale, provides mentoring by physicians at hospitals nationwide.

"Many doctors are hired by hospitals right out of a residency and they don't know what's expected in the workworld and how to deliver the best care. Through our program, they meet with physicians who have been trained to guide them," says Dr. Keyur Shah, a physician at Hinsdale Hospital. They also learn such nitty-gritty issues as where to park and how to get into a computer system, adds Dottie Price, who oversees the program.

Those companies that don't buy into mentoring are apt to lose out in the 21st Century. "Sooner or later, they'll wake up to a severe shortage of talent because they will have lost their best people at all levels," Katzenbach said.

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