**Creating a Mentoring Culture**

**By:**Lois J. Zachary, Ed.D. , Leadership Development Services, LLClzachary@leadservs.com
**Source:** Executive Update
Feature Article
**Published:** November 2002

From a happier staff to an increased organizational productivity rate, the benefits of a workplace culture that actively supports and organizes mentoring translate into money and time well spent. In this *Executive Update* feature article, Lois J. Zachary, Ed.D. - president of Leadership Development Services in Phoenix, Arizona - provides an overview of the necessary steps and organizational characteristics inherent in a "mentoring culture".

Executives who do not learn and do not promote learning within their organizations end up managing their organizations rather than leading them. Leaders also have the responsibility to serve as a role model, to mentor the next generation of leaders, and to provide continuous opportunities for learning and development.

Today's associations must be healthy and smart. For many companies, "healthy" and "smart" may seem like insurmountable challenges and the thought of mentoring, a luxury. However, establishing a mentoring culture is key to organizational health. It is a smart way to do business because of its power to enhance personal connections and maintain organizational vitality in the face of continuous challenge and change. Effective mentoring holds out the promise of achieving desirable results. It can improve retention, build morale, increase commitment, accelerate leadership development, provide ongoing career development, reduce stress, build teams, and facilitate organizational learning.

**Hallmarks of a Mentoring Culture**Today's organizational leaders must think systemically and create mentoring cultures rather than opting for the more expedient route of running a program. A resilient mentoring program requires cultural scaffolding to support its implementation, fully embed it in the organization, and secure organizational investment in the enterprise.

A mentoring culture is a learning and development culture. It deepens the ways employees manage their own growth and development, strengthens how they relate to one another, and facilitates organizational learning. An organization with an existing learning and development culture has a distinct advantage when creating a mentoring culture. The signs of a mentoring culture include the following hallmarks.

**Accountability** - Accountability is not heavy-handed; it is seamless and routine in a mentoring culture. From the launch, accountability assurances are put into place. These include a structure (formal or informal) that exists to support mentoring partners, mechanisms for providing ongoing feedback and evaluation, and routine benchmarking. Most importantly, roles and responsibilities for all key players (supervisors, for example) and mentoring goals are clarified so as to manage expectations and encourage self-accountability. Spending time to define roles and goals sets the stage for ensuring accountability.

**Alignment** - Successful mentoring programs also are tied to something larger than just a program. When mentoring is aligned within an organizational culture, it is not perceived as an add-on to what is already in place; rather, it is part of the association's DNA. Business reasons abound as to why associations should engage in mentoring, and such reasons are tied directly to results and communicated regularly. A shared understanding and vocabulary of mentoring practice exist that fits in naturally with the organization's values, mission, and goals.

**Communication** - In mentoring cultures people talk about mentoring. Leaders have identified stakeholders and the key messages that need to be communicated to them by certain people and at certain times. But communication is not just one way. The most critical communication establishes mechanisms for two-way feedback about what is working and what isn't. This ensures a constant flow of information for making process improvements.

**Demand** - People are enthusiastic about participating in mentoring relationships. They voluntarily seek out mentoring opportunities, formally and informally. Some mentors and mentees are involved in simultaneous mentoring relationships. When mentoring partners complete learning goals, they continue to seek mentoring relationships to work on new goals. Mentors are mentees, and mentees become mentors.

**Education and Training** - Continuous mentoring education and training opportunities are strategically integrated into the organization's overall training and development agenda. Existing training platforms support mentoring and vice versa. Opportunities for "next-step" education and advanced skills training are available for veteran mentors. Networking and support groups meet to exchange best practices and promote peer learning. Organizations that lack in-house capacity make education and training resources available outside the organization.

**Infrastructure** - Resources, both human and financial, are in place in meaningful ways. Proper budgets and time are ensured; mentoring "has a home" within the organization (i.e., someone "owns" it, and it is well-anchored within multiple layers of the organization framework); sponsorship is guaranteed; and specific individuals are tasked with spending dedicated time on communication, training, mentor coaching, partnership support, and administration. Dedicated time for engaging in mentoring relationships is set aside and honored.

**Multiple Venues** - Opportunities to engage in mentoring include formal and informal opportunities. These include but are not limited to group mentoring, long-distance mentoring, cross-cultural mentoring, e-mentoring, one-on-one mentoring, and mentoring networking sessions. Technologically based resources such as videoconferences, chat rooms, and Web sites are accessible, easy to use, and up to date.

**Role Modeling** - Leaders enable others to act by continuously raising the bar for themselves. This means they go first when it comes to mentoring. They share their stories and their best practices and encourage mentoring excellence. Champions regularly advocate mentoring, not just by being mentors themselves but by keeping current. Champions and advocates are given resources and tools to increase their effectiveness. Mentoring success stories are periodically shared in public forums and communications.

**Safety Net** - Support is always available to coach and counsel mentors, mentees, departments, and teams. Confidentiality is honored, and a positive learning outcome is reached when a mentoring relationship doesn't work out.

**Value and Visibility** - Whether through e-mail, personal contact, role modeling, banners and posters, or conversation, advocacy for mentoring goes on all the time in a mentoring culture. Celebrating small and large milestones, bringing closure to a relationship or a cycle of mentoring (on a programmatic basis), creates huge value. It provides an opportunity to elevate and expand knowledge about mentoring, share learning, align the culture, honor achievement, provide incentives for the future, and reinforce the purposing vision. Talking about mentoring in formal presentations, speeches, and informal meetings further reinforces the value.

Reward is another aspect of creating value. An intrinsic reward exists just for being part of a mentoring relationship, whether tied to professional development, goal achievement, or even a stipend. In some manner, intrinsic or extrinsic, acknowledgement and recognition for participation is visible in different forums and formats.

**When Mentoring Doesn't Work**The underlying reasons for the lack of success of many mentoring initiatives include lack of time, untested assumptions, inadequate training, lack of thoughtful pairing, failure to act on past lessons learned, a feeling of being blindsided, unclear program goals, failure to monitor the mentoring program, breach of confidentiality, failure to anticipate resistance, or lack of cultural congruence. Chances are, if you have tried to start a mentoring program, but it derailed, one or more of these reasons will resonate with you.

**Time** - Mentoring takes time, not only for those engaged in the mentoring relationship but also for the organization and those professionals responsible for developing, implementing, supporting, and evaluating the initiative. The time-is-money mantra is a real concern, especially in already overburdened associations. For real success, mentoring time must be allocated and not begrudged or resented. Although it takes time away from other things in the short run, the long- term return on the investment is huge.

**Untested Assumptions** - People hold varied assumptions about mentoring, mentoring relationships, and the roles of mentors and mentees. Agreeing on an operational definition manages expectations up front and clarifies what mentoring is and is not. Failure to discuss the parameters of mentoring roles leads to unrealistic expectations by program managers and participants.

**Failure to Act on Lessons Learned** - Often, the pace of the changes feels faster than the speed of light. We move from one initiative to another with barely enough time to reflect on what we are learning along the way. Consequently, we repeat the same mistakes, and our new initiatives are not as successful as we would have hoped. Taking the time to identify lessons learned before the planning process begins is crucial.

**The Feeling of Being Blindsided** - Building a mentoring culture requires anticipatory thinking. It means opening your eyes to what is coming down the pike and considering the implications so you don't get blindsided.

**Fuzzy Program Goals** - The goals of mentoring programs must be SMART. That is, they must be Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Timely as well as congruent with the organization's mission. Only after the goals are set should they be communicated to others in your organization.

**Inadequate Training** - Few association professionals receive adequate training or guidance about how to be a good mentor or mentee. Still, they are expected to design, implement, and manage mentoring programs. Some organizations offer initial mentoring training and perhaps some ad hoc networking sessions for mentoring participants. Frequently, training is not offered at point of need but at a point of convenience on the organizational calendar. Mentoring training, to be effective, needs to be available in many venues and formats and for multiple points of need.

**Lack of Thoughtful Pairing** - Even when choices are narrowed and pairings made, mentoring partners still need to "volunteer" for the relationship. This doesn't mean that pairing mentoring partners should be avoided. What it does mean is that participation in a particular mentoring relationship at a particular time is most successful when the participants volunteer or consent to the relationship. It also means that tremendous thought should go into partner-selection protocols and processes.

**Failure to Continuously Evaluate** - It is very easy to become complacent after a mentoring initiative is launched. Participants are enthusiastic, energetic, and eager. Expectations are high. Since other organizational initiatives and mandates demand more time, it seems there is less need to allocate for mentoring oversight. Best intentions are displaced, and continuous mentoring evaluation is relegated to the "we'll-get-to-it-later" inbox.

**Breach of Confidentiality** - When confidentiality is breached, the trust between mentoring partners quickly erodes. For that reason, safeguarding confidentiality must be a priority for mentoring partners. Safeguarding confidentiality is not limited, however, to just the mentoring partners. Leaders must spell out what information about the relationship is to be shared with supervisors or department heads.

**Naysayers** - No organization is without its skeptics, resisters, and potential saboteurs of mentoring and other (mostly new) initiatives. The reasons they articulate are legion: "We did mentoring before, and it didn't work;" "we don't have the time or resources;" or "we don't have enough mentors." Successful mentoring programs drum out resistance early and often by inviting feedback as the program is developed.

**Lack of Cultural Congruence** - A cultural mismatch is one of the primary reasons that mentoring fails to take hold in an organization. Far too many mentoring programs fail or merely survive because they were not sufficiently embedded in a supportive organizational culture.

**Sustainability: The Key to Success**Creating a mentoring culture is a process that requires focus, discipline, and patience because it is not only a process but a work in progress. The process of creating and re-creating is ongoing. It requires ongoing learning and feedback to achieve desired results. When mentoring is embedded in an organizational culture that values continuous learning, it increases the likelihood of sustainability. To be sustainable, mentoring cultures must have flexibility, ownership, clarity, and feedback.

**Flexibility** - To be sustainable, flexibility must be built into mentoring processes. This means avoiding gridlock caused by organizational overstructuring of procedures and protocols.

**Ownership -** Creating a home, providing scaffolding, and continuously nurturing commitment to mentoring fosters ownership. The players may change, but the integrity of the process must remain intact. Mentoring cannot be the pet project of a few individuals. While an executive director may "sponsor" mentoring, it must reside in a function or organization. For example, many organizations today are aligning mentoring with diversity initiatives. Others are attaching it to their development and learning function.

**Clarity** - Association leaders must remember that when everything gets called "mentoring," the integrity of the concept is violated. The mental models that people have drive how organizations design and implement mentoring initiatives. Achieving clarity about the concept, what it does and does not mean, and its underlying assumptions takes work - work that is fundamental to creating a mentoring culture.

**Feedback** - Sustaining positive results is difficult without feedback. Establishing clear communication channels helps ensure open communication. Requesting, receiving, providing, accepting, and acting on feedback are as integral to the culture as they are on a partnership level. Feedback is essential for providing appropriate levels of support, challenge, and vision.

The bottom line is that there is a clear connection between budgetary implications and a strong mentoring culture. In a mentoring culture, knowledge is managed; relationships are built; growth and development are nurtured; and employees are continuously learning. Employees are better prepared to pull together, to harness and focus their energy to create momentum that raises the bar for everyone. When the bar is raised, productivity increases, and organizations - and individuals - achieve amazing results.

**The Executive Director as Mentor**

Executive directors who engage in mentoring increase their potential to enhance volunteer and staff growth and development while enhancing their own growth and development as professionals. They say they gain exposure to new and diverse perspectives, improve their coaching and listening skills, hone leadership skills, become reenergized professionally, and have more satisfying and productive board-staff relationships.

The kind of mentoring relationship you select should be guided in part by knowledge of how you learn best. If you thrive on having multiple opportunities for learning simultaneously, you may want to establish a personal board of directors for yourself. If a one-to-one mentoring relationship is more compatible with your style, you have multiple options to consider in addition to the traditional mentoring relationship, including peer mentoring, reverse mentoring where you and a direct report mentor each other, and e-mentoring.