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Mentoring for diversity

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Mentoring for diversity

Formal mentoring programs to support equal opportunities objectives have become an established element of the corporate development portfolio. In particular, many companies have experimented with “glass ceiling” programs to support women in overcoming institutional and attitudinal barriers to advancement into middle and senior management. In recent years, however, a range of new diversity applications has emerged. Some enable ethnic groups in multicultural organisations to take redefine the balance between corporate culture and the cultural identities people bring with them into the organisation. Some attempt to capitalise on the inherent diversity of all employees, encouraging them to respect, value and learn from other people’s different perspectives. And some have found new ways to address the inequalities of power in organisational structures, for example by reversing the hierarchy.

The concept of mentoring for diversity is a relatively recent addition to the management lexicology. It’s not surprising, therefore, that it can be interpreted in a variety of ways, which reflect organisational or individual biases in the way it has been applied. Some of the practical programs, which I have been involved with or observed, reflect the diversity of mentoring for diversity:

- At An Post, the Irish Post Office, women managers are taking part in an intriguing experiment where mentors are drawn from more senior levels not just within the postal service, but from large companies at either end of the supply chain – both customers and suppliers. The aim is to provide as many as possible different perspectives on the roles, to which the women aspire
- At SAS, the Scandinavian air carrier, structured mentoring began with a program for women leaders and rapidly diversified to meet the needs of a variety of other groups. People are encouraged to seek a mentor from a different nationality or culture, a different gender or someone younger than themselves. The vast majority (95%) of these relationships have found that the inbuilt diversity gives the relationship an extra dynamism and helps to sustain the interest of both parties
- At World Bank, some 2,000 mentoring pairs have been set up, almost all at the instigation of groups of people from the same geographical regions. In each case, they have recognised the value in both networking together and creating close developmental relationships with people outside their natural groups

- At Procter and Gamble, a planned traditional glass ceiling approach – in which powerful male executives would adopt more junior female managers, to “groom” them for promotion – was abandoned in favour of relationships where the executives became the mentees and the more junior women became the mentors. The program had as one of its objectives overcoming a much higher labour turnover among women managers than among men – a goal which has now been achieved. The executive mentees have gained significant insights into diversity issues in general, and a greater empathy with the issues female employees face. Given that most of P&G’s customers are women, this empathy is inevitably reflected in marketing policy
- At the Cabinet Office in the UK, an innovative program of leadership develop provides mentors for civil servants with disabilities ranging from blindness, and loss of limbs and to schizophrenia

Defining mentoring

Even a brief skim through the academic and practitioner literature on mentoring throws up dozens of definitions of mentoring. These divide broadly into what can be called the US traditional or godfathering and the European or developmental. The former starts from an assumption that the focus of the relationship is the mentor’s extensive experience and willingness to exercise power and influence on behalf of the mentee (typically called a protégé). It is often characterised by long-term relationships that may involve a degree of mutual dependence. It is also often confused with line management roles.

Developmental mentoring, on the other hand, emphasises the mentee’s role in managing the relationship, and focuses on the achievement of personal insight, intellectual challenge and increasing self-reliance. In formal programs, the relationship is supported by the organisation for a relatively short time – typically two years – after which the mentee moves on, or the relationship becomes less intense and more informal. Developmental mentoring is always an off-line activity, in which the difference in perspective and experience between the two partners is valued as a source of mutual learning. The hierarchical status or power of the mentor is far less important than the learning potential from the relationship – on both sides. Hence, the increasing incidence of peer mentoring and upward mentoring. (Jack Welch, CEO of GE, reportedly has an upward mentor, for example.)

Our own extensive research into the dynamics of mentoring suggests that organisations often adopt compromises between these two models, to fit their own culture and circumstances.

Another useful way of looking at mentoring is as a source of Personal Reflective Space. PRS is a way of describing the inner dialogue (talking to oneself) that happens when people slip into deep thought about one topic, which has been disturbing them for some time. They ask themselves questions from different perspectives, trying better to understand the issue and very often reach new insights that open up further options to deal with it.

In mentoring, the mentee invites a trusted outsider to join in this dialogue. The mentor asks more penetrating questions, challenges assumptions more forcefully, suggests new ways of looking at things and generally raises the pace and quality of the thinking process.

Defining diversity

In the same way, diversity has taken on a diversity of meanings. Does it, at one extreme, refer to inadequate access to power for specific groups, based on gender, race or disability? Does it refer more broadly to the management task of integrating and using – to the maximum benefit of the organisation and its members – the talents of all employees? Or valuing and exploiting differences in culture, background and personality, perceiving diversity as a source of competitive advantage? How the organisation views diversity will significantly influence the ways in which it applies mentoring and the outcomes it expects.

Structuring the successful diversity mentoring program

As the volume of diversity mentoring programs grows, it becomes easier to identify good practice from those that succeed and fail. Some of the critical lessons we have observed include:

The importance of clear purpose

One multinational service organisation recently required its European operations to provide mentors for all women staff above a certain level. Matches were made by dictate, lunch appointments made – and mentor and mentee sat there wondering what they were supposed to do. Most of these intended relationships never got off the ground because there was no clarity about roles, nor about expected outcomes. Successful programs always ensure that everyone involved is clear about what is expected in terms of behaviour and outcome, for mentee, mentor and the organisation.

Understanding the perspective of the intended audience

Many programs founder because they fail to take into account the wishes of the potential mentees. A public sector organisation found that a much-publicised program aimed at racial minorities attracted a good supply of mentors but very few mentees. Feedback from the intended audience revealed that they were unhappy about being targeted in this way, because it suggested that there was something wrong with them. A similar story emerges from a large engineering company, where an intended mentoring program for women was radically changed after consultation with them. The women argued that this would devalue the process, because it would be seen as a remedial program. Instead, they wanted (and got) a program for any employee, but one which women were encouraged to join.

Being realistic about numbers

A common issue for mentoring programs in general is how to balance quality against quantity. While on the one hand, it is unrealistic to expect most line managers to have the developmental competence of a professional mentor, a poor mentor can have a devastating effect on the mentee and on other people, too. Very few companies have successfully implemented an “all-comers” program and even in those that have succeeded, finding enough effective mentors is a continuing headache.

This has an immediate impact on the numbers that can be helped at any one time. The program designers, therefore, need to think through clearly who are the priority audiences, who might be the most appropriate mentors for them and how supply is likely to affect demand. In general, people with real jobs in the organisation can rarely cope with more than three formal mentoring relationships.

Scarcity becomes even more of an issue when mentees seek mentors from the same gender or racial group. By definition, these are likely to be fewer in number at the higher levels in the organisation. The management of expectations therefore becomes a significant influence on the reputation and success of the program.

The need for choice

Even more than for mentoring in general, diversity mentoring relationships demand that both parties want to be there. Where the mentor perceives there to be strong reciprocal benefits from exploring and understanding other perspectives, the relationship tends to be much more successful than when the mentor is either reluctant, or simply trying to be altruistic. There is also some evidence that mentees tend to be more proactive when they have exercised some choice in the selection of their mentor. Good practice appears to be that mentees are guided in their selection, but left to make up their own minds.

A recurring issue here is whether it is better for the mentee and mentor to come from the same diversity group. The table below puts some of the arguments into context:

Table 1: Same group mentoring: the pros and cons

Issue	For	Against
Perspective	Greater empathy with mentee’s issues and experiences. Research suggests higher levels of psychosocial support in same race mentoring than cross race.	More difficult to help mentee take different or broader perspective. Research suggests career outcomes for mentees are less satisfactory than in cross race mentoring.
Networking	Same race/gender networks can be more close-knit and sociable.	Mentee’s and mentor’s networks may be too similar to add value to the relationship.
Power (where same group mentors are not well-represented in the higher levels of the hierarchy)	Easier to establish rapport when the authority/hierarchy gap is relatively small.	Mentors are likely to have less insight into politics and prospects.
Empowerment/ dependency	Low risk of creating dependency.	Relatively high risk of creating dependency in relationships

In summary, it seems that each case needs to be examined on its individual merits and that en masse solutions will generally be inappropriate.

A practical case is Tricia, who wanted to become HR director. She needed to learn how to think and behave like a director, but without compromising the feminine qualities that underlay her effectiveness as an HR professional. Because she had no female role model to work with inside the organisation, she found one outside – a former CEO. Once she achieved her promotion, she dissolved that relationship and established a new one, this time with a highly experienced, male HR director, who had “seen and done it all”. In this case, gender was irrelevant to her choice.

The need for training

Again, even more than for mentoring in general, diversity mentoring demands that mentors and mentees clearly understand their roles, responsibilities and the context in which the relationship operates. Successful diversity training programs typically spend time on both developing mentoring competence and raising awareness of the relevant diversity issues. Key topics for the latter include the nature of group disempowerment, how stereotyping occurs, and basic differences between how different cultures or genders may approach the same issues.

Stereotyping and diversity mentoring

Stereotyping is a common issue (although not always recognised as such) in both same group and cross group mentoring relationships. In same group relationships, mentor and mentee may share stereotypes and, therefore, not question them. In cross group mentoring, either (or both) party may be making assumptions that unconsciously limit the potential of the mentee.

A critical issue here is the extent to which the perceived disadvantage acts as the focus of the relationship. At one extreme, we have the example of the mentor who pointedly never referred to the problems encountered by a wheelchair-bound mentee, with the (unintended) result that the mentee felt increasingly patronised. At the other extreme, relationships that place a disadvantage at the core of discussions have a poor record of helping people set and achieve ambitious goals. Again, a balance is needed to allow people to put their disadvantage into perspective and concentrate on what they can achieve and how. One of the most helpful things a mentor can do is help the mentee construct a realistic “bank balance” of advantages and disadvantages they have in the workplace. When multiple factors are taken into account, including education, experience, personality, class and so on, the mentee can work on a much more rounded picture and balance building on strengths against coping with weaknesses.

Among the insights that effective diversity mentoring pairs tend to share are that:

- They do (both) have stereotypes
- Even benevolent stereotypes (such as “Women are better at ‘soft’ management tasks”) can limit people’s ability to achieve
- Recognising and being open about stereotypes is the most effective way of dealing with them

The mentee’s own stereotypes may be a prime barrier to achievement. Various experiments in recent years have demonstrated that people relapse easily into unconscious stereotypes. It appears, for example, that defining a program as aimed at helping black people may actually stimulate stereotypical behaviour in the black mentee, when s/he is faced with a white mentor. The issues the mentor addresses are then shaped by the observed behaviour, distorting and devaluing the mentoring process.

The key, of course, is the development of deep trust and genuine, open dialogue. Where the relationship works, these two aspects seem to grow together. In cross group mentoring, the more the mentor can demonstrate a personal interest in understanding and learning from and about the mentee's world, the easier it is to develop trust and dialogue.

Implications for management developers

As the majority of service organisations become increasingly driven by virtual teams, networks and complex alliances, capitalising on diversity will become more and more important as a source of competitive advantage. The more diverse an organisation is in its cultures, its technologies, and its disciplines, the wider the range of responses it can muster to deal with competitive threats and opportunities – as long as the habits of dialogue, knowledge sharing and constructive challenge are well-embedded into the systems, practices and the common culture. Mentoring is emerging as one of the most practical and powerful methods of building that organisational competence.