Performance Frontiers

Why Mentoring Programs are a No-Brainer

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One of the most celebrated mentoring ‘pairs’ of our time are Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. Over a 30 plus year friendship, Bill learnt much, saying that Warren, “… asked good questions and told educational stories. There’s nothing I like so much as learning, and I had never met anyone who thought about business in such a clear way.” And, few can debate the success of these two over the past half a century.

But often the opportunity to mentor and be mentored comes less frequently in life than we might think. And on all accounts that is a shame. As we will see, there are few more powerful experiences of connection and self-growth than the mentoring relationship.

The Possibilities

In organisations, mentoring programs occupy an interesting position. They seem like a good idea but getting them to work consistently often ends up being more difficult than at first blush. They are liable to run out of steam, or become tick-box

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exercises, being highly dependent on the investment and time of mentors. This common outcome is contrary to the overwhelming evidence suggesting that mentoring has huge benefits for developing emerging leaders. As researchers from John Hopkins University write in the Harvard Business Review: *"After five decades of mentoring relationship research, the evidence is irrefutable: people who have strong mentors accrue a host of professional benefits, including more rapid advancement, higher salaries, greater organizational commitment, stronger identity, and higher satisfaction with both job and career. They also see personal benefits, such as better physical health and self-esteem, ease of work-life integration, and strong–er relational skills. At its best, mentoring can transform lives and careers while bolstering retention and maximizing employee potential."* The number of major organisations that have mentoring programs continues to grow and already makes up the bulk of the largest and most successful organisations in the world. One important finding of mentoring research is that mentoring improves retention of mentees – an important consideration in the current war for talent. Mentees are just generally happier at work. Mentoring is also a key initiative for furthering diversity, equity and inclusion goals at organisations. Mentoring diverse team members can support them in career progression and overcoming structural barriers to their success. Taking this even further, many advocate for sponsorship, the step beyond mentorship, as a powerful corrective to unconscious bias and other factors preventing full inclusion.

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The Pitfalls

So, if we know the many positives, where do these programs go wrong? The greatest pitfall is when these programs experience poor follow through or aren't treated as worthwhile. This is called "marginal mentoring". Mentors can often be time-poor and so there is a constant battle to find the motivation and possibility for success. For example, previous research has shown that informal mentoring can have a stronger impact than formal mentoring. It's all about making the program a priority and providing the necessary incentives – structural and otherwise – for engagement by all parties. That's where the greatest impact can be found.

The Plan

Reflecting on the above, there are a range of concrete actions we can take at each of the stages of the mentoring relationship to make the program a success:

- **Preparing –** It can be highly beneficial to offer mentoring training for mentors. Rather than assuming

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that any experienced team member can mentor well, organisations can set themselves up for success by providing these skills.

- **Connecting –** Design the program with a structure and incentives for engagement. Making mentorship roles prestigious or remunerated in some way can incentivise effective participation and mean that people really see it as an important part of their work, and life.
- **Learning –** Checking-in and support for the relationship can go a long way, particularly during busy periods. This might look like having a central mentoring coordinator for parties to speak to if they need support.
- **Ending –** Create the space for an ongoing relationship. Something as simple as hosting a mentoring closing night bookends the program while also setting up the relationships to continue ongoing if it is in the interests of the parties.

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Need More Help?

The research is clear – any investment in a mentoring program is paid back tenfold. However, we need to be mindful not to just ‘plug and play’ a mentoring arrangement. Performance Frontiers work with organisations to design programs which avoid marginal mentoring and create lasting relationships. Speak to us today about how we can partner with you to imagine the possibilities, avoid the pitfalls, and perfect a plan to make your mentoring program both possible and powerful.

Find Out More

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