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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

LEADERSHIP

A New Approach to Mentoring

These days, you need more than a single person. You need a network.

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Working with a mentor is a classic recipe for success in business. But the traditional mentoring relationship just doesn't work anymore.

Typically, you choose a single senior colleague -- or get assigned to one -- who can show you the ropes and open the right doors. But the world of work has gotten too complicated for one person to provide all the guidance and opportunities you need to manage challenges and prepare for the future.

Consider this: How can one teacher know enough to help you keep up with rapidly changing technology, as well as navigate the challenges of globalization, a multicultural work force and team-based decision making? Even people who have served as mentors often need help staying abreast of all these changes.

A better approach is to create and cultivate a developmental network -- a small group of people to whom you can turn for regular mentoring support and who have a genuine interest in your learning and development. Think of it as your personal board of directors.

The composition of the group depends on where you are in your career and what you're looking for. If you're just getting started, you could certainly turn to your boss or assigned mentor for help. But you should also look further, seeking out peers to get feedback on areas where you need to improve, such as public speaking or working in teams.

At midcareer, you might look to other managers and people outside the organization; someone you know from a professional association might have insight on new ideas in your industry, for instance. Senior managers might get coaching from peers on the next steps to take in their career, from family members on achieving a better balance in their lives, and even from juniors who have crucial technical expertise vital to immediate business challenges.

What sets this group apart from people you network with more generally or from casual or one-time relationships? The relationships have a high degree of mutual learning and trust in which both individuals give and receive various kinds of

informational, emotional and strategic support. What's more, these individuals have been enlisted by you to provide the guidance and support that will enable you to take the next step forward, whatever that next step may be.

A number of organizations are now helping employees build these kinds of networks. In one pharmaceutical company, for instance, product-development team leaders come together monthly in groups of 10 to 12 to coach one another. They start each meeting with a check-in where each member identifies new challenges, such as dealing with a poor performer and building a team that could deliver new designs in a timely manner. Members address each issue in turn, giving their peers possible strategies. The give and take also helps boost their interpersonal skills.

Similarly, in a consumer-products company, groups of junior executives have been meeting with a senior executive on a regular basis to discuss challenges they face as they seek positions of greater executive responsibility. Here, these junior executives have opportunities to enlist one or more peers and a senior executive into their developmental networks. And, in a major urban school district, informal mentoring circles for principals provide opportunities to enlist peers as members of their developmental networks to support their leadership development.

Developmental networks can also be extremely valuable in the context of global and multicultural business environments. For example, the challenges that expatriates face as they move abroad, and then again when they return to their home country, can be met most effectively when the expat has a strong developmental network to draw on.

These initiatives are beginning to show results in critical measures such as enhanced employee engagement and satisfaction, faster cycle times in new-product development, customer satisfaction and employee retention. The quality of developmental relationships is, indeed, a real source of competitive advantage.

Here's a look at the steps you need to take to develop your own developmental network.

1. Know Thyself

Although this tip may sound clichéd, it's crucial. When people seek out help, they generally aren't as well-prepared as they could be. Only if people know their own goals, strengths and weaknesses will they be able to figure out whom to turn to for support -- and know how to ask for and apply advice effectively.

You should start by reviewing appraisals and developmental feedback that you have received. And ask yourself tough questions. What do you really enjoy doing at work? How can you best contribute, given your talents and interests? Where would you like to be in two years? In five years? Are there skill and knowledge gaps that you want to fill? Do you have a healthy balance between your work and outside commitments? Who knows you well enough to give useful feedback?

You should also assess your interpersonal skills. Are you comfortable reaching out for help, sharing your experiences and soliciting feedback? Or even just starting conversations with strangers? If you have shortcomings here, it's vital that you address them, or you may have trouble creating an effective developmental network.

Fortunately, many organizations offer a range of activities to help people answer these kinds of questions, such as leadership-development programs and career-assessment tools.

2. Know Your Context

Knowing yourself is only half the equation. You must also know as much as possible about how to achieve your goal -- whether that means a promotion, a new career or simply better balance in life.

If you're looking to advance at your job, for instance, you must understand how the promotion process works at your company and figure out which potential sponsors might be keen on coaching you. If you want to change careers, you would want to be sure you understood the ins and outs of your desired field, everything from its hiring practices to what's expected in the job. A good way to proceed is to build up contacts in the industry, perhaps by attending professional conferences.

These new contacts may then introduce you to people already working in the area that you aspire to join. And if you nurture these relationships, over time these people may become part of your developmental network. But it's key to focus on a handful of relationships with individuals who seem to genuinely care about you and have wisdom or resources to offer. And be mindful of what you can offer to each of these individuals to create mutual learning.

3. Enlist Developers

Next, it's time to actually build your developmental network, enlisting people who can help you advance your goals. So, whom should you choose?

Let's say you're a product manager in a technology company aspiring to reach a higher position. You'll want to develop alliances with people at more senior levels who can sponsor and promote you, coach you and serve as a role model.

This, however, isn't sufficient. What about peers who can help you learn to navigate the company's politics and can share information about those at more senior levels? And are there individuals outside your organization who can help you keep learning? Professors or fellow students from graduate school could remind you about theories or practices that might be useful in your current job. Contacts at professional organizations could give you insights into new technology, while people in your family could act as a sounding board.

For some, forming outside developmental relationships may be just the kind of help they need to make a career change. Indeed, the greater the diversity of one's network, the more open-minded one is likely to be regarding next steps.

It is critical to remember that high-quality mentoring is a process of give and take, where both parties learn from each other. So, you should approach potential developers with a sense of how they might benefit from an association with you.

What can they learn from you -- new skills? Maybe they'll be able to develop insight into how people in your job see the world and prioritize what's important. Could helping you be an opportunity for a senior manager to hone coaching skills or to develop confidence in mentoring others?

Having a clear sense of these possibilities will make it easier for you to empathize with your allies, ask relevant questions and disclose relevant information about yourself as you ask for guidance.

4. Regularly Reassess

As your career and life unfold, you'll need to keep reassessing your developmental network; the setup that served you well a few years ago may not work as your situation changes. You must ask yourself which developers can still help you meet your goals, and which need to be eased aside for new ones.

This may sound calculating and borderline manipulative, but remember that you're not actually discarding old allies. As you bring new people into your network, don't discard the old ones, just look on them in a different way -- perhaps as valued friends whom you consult occasionally instead of colleagues that you frequently rely on for advice.

In short, it's a matter of being more intentional when it comes to seeking out advice, and this is relevant for everyone, at every career stage, not just for those starting out.

For a look at a successful reassessment, consider a young software executive we've interviewed. When he started out, he wanted to become an expert in dealing with client problems, so he sought out a senior colleague who served as a role model and eventually provided him with exposure to clients. He was promoted several times and built a strong developmental network, including his boss, the vice president of marketing, several of his immediate subordinates and one of his peers.

After 12 years, he was interested in moving into a leadership position where he could run one of the company's business units. But the current leaders appeared to be quite comfortable in their roles. And he began to feel that there were few people he could turn to for advice, given an increasing sense of competition among his peers (and his own fast-paced trajectory).

So, he began to build a developmental network that could help him manage his new challenges. The first person he turned to was his wife, who provided continuing support and confirmation during this difficult time. As she worked through the issues with him, she hit upon a crucial piece of advice, encouraging him to look outside the company for a new job where he could meet his goals. At the same time, he consulted an executive-search firm, which counseled him

about where he might turn for opportunities.

Putting all of it together, he left his company for another firm, where he led several teams. Now he's considering launching a start-up of his own.

5. Develop Others

As you enlist people in your network, consider how you can benefit them, as well. Remember, high-quality mentoring is about mutual learning; consider how your high-quality relationships serve to develop others and your organization.

As you enlist more senior colleagues, for instance, you'll be providing them with opportunities to gain new knowledge from you, to hone their coaching skills and possibly boost their enthusiasm at work. Similarly, as you enlist junior colleagues in your developmental network to hone your coaching skills, you are creating an opportunity for them to bring you into their developmental networks. Exploring these complementary personal goals can solidify the relationship and ultimately help both of you and your organization.

If you're a senior leader, meanwhile, you should also work to foster developmental networks in your organization. Just by forming your own network, and joining other people's networks, you will serve as a role model. But you can also actively encourage coaching and mentoring among those that you manage, by designing jobs to encourage peer coaching, for example. And you can launch leadership-development programs that help individuals to develop the skills and self-awareness they'll need to build strong developmental networks.

Ultimately, these developmental networks can enhance organizational performance and development. It is, in essence, a win-win proposition for you and your organization.

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