

The New Meaning of Workplace Mentorship

Forget the idea of one person to guide your career, here's how the next generation will learn on the job.

By Laura Vanderkam; January 16, 2015

When it comes to generational stereotypes, Millennials are known for being tech savvy. So it may come as a surprise that, in one recent survey, far more young people said they preferred to learn from coaches and mentors than from e-learning options. If you think about it, though, "This makes perfect sense," says Amanda Mitchell, founder of Our Corporate Life, a company that advises businesses on people issues. "The stereotypical Millennial grew up with highly involved parents who scheduled a heavy load of extracurricular activities in an effort to create a well-rounded child. Millennial lives were focused on experiential learning."

Fortunately, says Mitchell, "the Millennial definition of a mentor differs from the traditional," and "instead of one mentor, they look to a series of different experts to be their 'mentors.'" The trap for managers is thinking that you, alone, have to meet everyone's needs. Here's how to expand your thinking.

Ask Employees to Build Their Own Desired Skill Lists

Karie Willyerd is the VP for learning and social adoption at SuccessFactors, an SAP company. She suggests telling younger employees that "If you have your eye on a position above you that may open up in a year or two, then compare your experience with that of the person currently in the role to see where you have catching up to do." This skill list will keep everyone focused, because "there's nothing more draining for a mentor than a growing list of goals, with no end in sight."

Spread the Love

You alone don't have to be your employees' lone mentor. "This artificial limitation can lead to overwhelm and resentment," says Mitchell. "To avoid this, managers should take steps to ensure that the mentoring 'need' is met by team interaction as well as interaction with select people throughout the company during the course of doing their jobs."

Make introductions where you can, and don't think you have to only deliver the top people at your company. Willyerd stresses that "it's important to match mentors and Millennials that are separated by only a few years of experience. Experts may be so far removed from a young professional's day-to-day world that they can't articulate good approaches to the kinds of problems they face."

Be Generous with the Feedback

Everyone wants feedback, but Millennials are more vocal in demanding it. Why not give it? Mitchell says to "Consider regular debriefs regarding how the team handles routine tasks. It trains staffers to look for ways to continuously improve, it encourages ownership among your team, and often surfaces ideas that can improve everyday work experience."

Consider Classes of a Different Sort

If multiple young employees have the need to develop the same skill, such as making a business case for a new product, you can band them together to teach it, or have someone else teach it. "A mini class on a discrete topic like that is attractive to a busy mentor because it reins in the conversation," says Willyerd. It gives the mentor a bigger bang for her buck.

Define the End

If you match your employees up with a mentor to learn a specific skill, put a time limit on it, like a few weeks. It's important, says Willyerd to "end the relationship before it becomes a chore for the mentor." You want to leave everyone wanting more.

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