

Title:

Mentoring Programs for Professional Service Firms: Creating Mentoring Relationships that Serve the Individual and the Firm

Word Count:

732

Summary:

It seems almost everyone can use a little something extra to help them increase their effectiveness or give them a competitive edge. Those in professional service firms are no exception; however, they do face unique challenges.

Keywords:

mentoring programs, service firms, professional service, organizing, goal setting

Article Body:

It seems almost everyone can use a little something extra to help them increase their effectiveness or give them a ompetitive edge. Those in professional service firms are no exception; however, they do face unique challenges. With so much emphasis on billable hours for accountants and lawyers, how can they find the time to devote to personal development? Could asking for help demonstrate needed initiative or threaten credibility? Despite these challenges, more professionals are seeking mentors.

Contrary to popular belief, mentoring programs are not solely for the young and new in their careers. Even more seasoned professionals find benefit by addressing issues related to personal development, business development, and life/work balance. Mentoring conversations are less about learning the ropes, and more about thinking strategically about goals.

Before you start your search for a mentor, decide what it is you would most want to accomplish through the process. It will help you make the best decision.

Where do you find good mentors? Here are a few places to look:

- **Inside your firm**. Fortunately, more organizations are identifying ways to help employees create and develop mutually rewarding mentoring relationships. Some offer formal mentoring programs. Formal mentoring programs should not be a simple matching game. While it might seem logical to pair a more experienced professional with an individual newer in his career, other issues should be

considered first:

- a. The needs and goals of individuals
- b. An individual's commitment level to personal growth
- c. A potential mentor's commitment level to the process
- d. The organization's top priorities

If there's no formal mentoring program, simply ask someone whose work you admire if they would be willing to spend some time with you over the next few months to help you focus on some goals. You don't even have to use the word "mentor" which can seem too daunting of a role for some.

- **Outside your firm**. There are some mentor programs that exist apart from the organization. They attract individuals from a variety of organizations. Participants in these programs are assigned a mentor from outside the organization. These programs help you foster relations beyond your own internal network and across industries. Such programs can be found at national and local levels.

Not everyone should be in a mentoring program. These programs work best for those who are self-motivated and open to change. Mentoring programs can be structured a variety of ways. Some include peer coaching or group coaching. Ideally a mentoring program should be integrated with the strategic objectives of the firm. Determine the specific desired outcomes of the program and measures of success.

You may also consider working with an external coach. An external coach provides a personalized approach to help you achieve specific goals. Explore the possibility of your organization sponsoring a coaching engagement; otherwise, consider the process an investment in your own development.

Whether you're working with a coach or a mentor, here are some tips on how to make the process most successful.

- Determine the outcomes both of you want to achieve first. For example, some may want to learn or hone a skill like presenting or strategic planning. Some may want to gain more knowledge about a particular career path. Some may want support dealing with a particular challenge or opportunity.
- Establish best ways to communicate. Will you meet in person, by phone or both? How frequently will you meet? Meetings need not be time consuming when you're highly focused.
- Set a goal. Set a specific concrete goal to accomplish during a given time

frame. Make sure it's not too general such as, "I want to be a better leader." Instead it might be something like, "I want to meet with each person in the practice group within 30 days to get feedback." Initiate a particular meeting or project that helps you exercise the specific skill you want to develop. Being goal focused helps establish greater accountability for results.

- Debrief. Establish checkpoints along the way to assess how things are going for both of you. Determine what would make the relationship or process even better.

While mentoring relationships can be interesting and enjoyable, they should also be productive. These relationships should provide opportunities for both learning and action. The best relationships have the potential to create value for the employee, the mentor and the firm as a whole.