

Mentoring in the Project Environment

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Organizations need to complete projects faster, cheaper, and better in order to survive in a competitive world. This pace of change demands that project teams gain the capacity to learn continuously and quickly. Mentoring supports much of what is currently known about how individuals learn, including the importance of experiential, situated learning.

Today the emphasis of skill development is on knowledge plus competencies. Traditional classroom training provides the knowledge, and a formal mentoring program provides the development of competencies. Training plus mentoring plus experience leads to the continuous professional development.

The project environment provides several challenges to implementing a mentoring program. The short-term relationships with team members, aggressive time lines, and disparate teams are all common to the project environment. These factors present a challenge to the project manager to provide an effective mentoring program.

This paper describes 1) a brief overview of mentoring and its benefits, 2) five mentoring programs tailored to the project environment, and 3) a model for implementing a mentoring program specifically designed for developing project management competencies in project teams.

Mentoring through the Ages

The concept of mentoring was first documented in Greek mythology and Homer's tale of Odysseus. Odysseus entrusted his son, Telemachus, to his trusted counselor, Mentor, when he set out on his odyssey. The old man, Mentor, became the surrogate father, guardian, and teacher of Telemachus, the young mentee—thus, the description of a mentor as a role model or leader who is willing to nurture the growth and development of an individual with less experience

by sharing knowledge and insights that have been learned through experience.

In ancient China, it was common for people to look for a “shi-fu,” or “the wise man.” The pursuit for knowledge, skills, and techniques was great. There could be a variety of reasons for such a quest, for example, to acquire some basic skills for survival reasons, to seek knowledge in order to enrich the life or make it more meaningful, or to learn some techniques so as to conquer another province or overthrow a dynasty, and so on. There were many stories of eager students taking great pains and difficulties and years in search for such a personal mentor or “shi-fu.”

Throughout history, there are numerous examples from different cultures in which a wise person or instructor coached, mentored, and empowered junior members. This practice continues today in many professions. Today the education, library, and community services have the most documented work on formalized mentoring programs. This paper borrows on their processes and adapts them to the project environment.

Definitions of Mentoring

There is no Guide to the Body of Knowledge in Mentoring as there is for Project Management. Therefore the definition of mentoring varies depending upon the situation. Following are several commonly accepted definitions of mentoring.

The dictionary definition is wise and trusted counselor or teacher. In the religious community, the term is interpreted as a personal guide or teacher in spiritual and philosophical matters. According to the business community, the term is thought to mean a recognized leader in a field who serves as a personal coach or guide in professional and business competencies. In the academic community, the term is interpreted as an acknowledged and

Exhibit 1. Continuous Professional Development Formula



influential advocate of a movement or idea who serves as a personal guide or teacher in developing disciples of the movement or idea.

While the term takes on a different meaning depending upon the environment, the common element is that the mentor is respected and trusted for their expertise.

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring benefits all parties involved, including the organization, the mentored individual, and the mentor. Summarized below are the key benefits of a formal mentoring program.

Benefits to the Organization

There are many advantages to an organization that has a formal mentoring program. However, the most effective mentoring programs occur when the program is part of an overall organizational commitment to learning and quality.

Staff morale is increased as a result of the flow of communications between senior management and junior personnel; talent is discovered, talented and motivated staff are retained, and a stable base during periods of major organizational and career change is established.

Leaders and leadership qualities are developed as a result of real learning and behavior change, a fostering of shared values and teamwork, and improved management through development of interpersonal and technical skills. Increased business productivity occurs due to creating personal performance goals in line with corporate objectives. Creativity and innovation is encouraged from developing trust and empowering mentees.

The development of project managers is accelerated through removing obstacles to successful project management by predicting and managing personal and organizational regression. Projects work by sustaining commitment to corporate vision in a critical mass of senior managers and help manage the downside risk of project management and maintain performance during periods of rapid change.

Benefits to the Mentee

Mentoring by more senior colleagues has effectively facilitated the personal, intellectual, and career development of more junior members. At the individual level, the benefits of being mentored vary widely depending on the particular needs, aspirations, and situation of the mentee. Below is a list of the common benefits to the mentee from a review of the literature on mentoring programs:

- confidence to lead and to champion the project
- improved people-management skills
- improved listening, challenging, and empathizing skills
- confidence to set and achieve stretching performance goals
- having someone to talk openly to
- having a wider perspective on the impact of their management style
- being less ruled by feelings and more able to cope with difficult situations
- having the courage to be more radical and to sell their ideas more strongly
- opening up additional ways of thinking
- being more mindful of the need to deal with the underlying problems, not just the symptoms.

Benefits to the Mentors

The mentors themselves benefit from the perpetuation of the project management culture, the satisfaction of contributing to the success of others, and the enhanced potential for collaboration with junior colleagues.

Five Mentoring Programs Tailored to Project Management

Each mentoring program meets different needs. Some focus on academics and career guidance, some provide role models, and some provide extra support and guidance concerning resolving day-to-day problems. Each is appropriate for a different situation. This diversity of programs provides options not only for mentees, but also for mentors, depending on the particular needs, interests, and commitments.

The following highlights five different program types, illustrating each with adaptations to the project management environment.

Traditional Programs

A senior project manager is assigned to a new project manager as a mentor. This generally is a long-term relationship of at least a year, during which the mentor is a role model and source of professional development for the mentee. This method is suitable for long-term projects of one or more years in length. The protégé and the mentor meet formally twice a month for the life of the project. In the initial meeting, a learning plan is developed. During this meeting, learning needs are identified and prioritized. Then the appropriate learning activities for the learning style of the mentee are determined. The mentee and mentor determine the objective and the format for each meeting and when and how frequently the

learning plan is evaluated. The key to success for this program is setting a high priority on mentoring by both the mentor and mentee.

Short-Term, Focused Activity

Programs in this category focus on a particular goal or topic, such as schedule development or team building. A specific time phase of no more than six months is set to accomplish the goal. Choose this method for short-term projects in which team members go their separate ways at the end of the project. Also, short-term mentoring is beneficial when a team member is highly skilled technically and desires to gain a specific nontechnical skill. Each protégé is matched with a mentor who is skilled in the focused activity. Together they agree on a schedule of meetings and learning activities appropriate to the specific skill. This is an excellent method for developing weak areas or filling in skill gaps.

Group Mentoring

A senior project manager is assigned to two or more junior team members. The group focuses on developing project management skills by learning from a mentor and one another. This technique can be adapted to either a long-term mentoring or a short-term, focused-activity mentoring program. The mentor and mentees meet to determine the format and type of mentoring. Additionally, they identify which project management learning needs to concentrate on. The next step is to set a schedule of learning activities and meetings to review how the skills are put in practice. This method works best when the protégés have similar project management competencies. The learning occurs from the mentor's expertise and from the mentees sharing their lessons learned with each other.

Peer Mentoring

Each team member takes a turn to mentor the others in the group. Each project team member chooses a particular skill to mentor the others, and then the team members put the skill into practice after the session. Each session follows a disciplined approach. The session begins with a debriefing in which the team members share what they did to apply the skill from the previous session. Then the team mentor introduces the new topic and learning objectives, followed by a review of the material, examples, and an exercise. Then each team member shares with the group how he will implement the skill. In closing, the session is evaluated and feedback is given to the mentor. Prior to implementing this program, the project team receives training from a skilled facilitator on how to identify the skills to develop and to train the team in lesson-plan development and delivery.

This program generally lasts for the duration of the project. This is a great for team building and for project management skill development.

Team Mentoring

Team mentoring occurs when two or more senior project managers are assigned to a protégé. The mentors and the protégé determine the mentoring goal and the roles and responsibilities of each member. This method is particularly beneficial for developing a project manager to manage culturally diverse teams or to manage global projects. In this situation, the project managers assigned to the mentee have different cultural backgrounds.

Implement a Mentoring Program in the Project Environment

Whatever method or methods of mentoring an organization chooses, the process of implementing the program is the same. A formal mentoring process with clear policies is the key to successfully implementing a project-management mentoring program.

The formal mentoring program provides a structured approach to selecting, training, and supporting mentors. It also allows for evaluation of the program and continuous improvement of project management. Additionally, there is a platform upon which mentors can be recognized. Typically, the mentoring program can be initiated through a project office or the training and development department.

The phases of implementation for a formal mentoring program are planning and design, screening, matching and training of mentoring and mentees, learning plan development, and performance measures. A brief description of each of these phases follows.

Planning and Design

There are no established guidelines for a mentoring program for project management. The first step is to define the mentoring program objectives. The next step is to establish some basic roles and responsibilities for a successful mentor/protégé relationship. The following outlines a few roles for the mentor, the protégé, and for the mentor and protégé together.

Mentor

- Provide guidance based on past business experiences.
- Create a positive counseling relationship and climate of open communication.
- Help the protégé identify problems and solutions.
- Lead the protégé through problem-solving processes.

- Offer constructive criticism in a supportive way.
- Share stories, including mistakes.
- Assign “homework” if applicable.
- Refer the protégé to other business associates.
- Be honest about business expertise.
- Solicit feedback from the protégé.
- Come prepared to each meeting to discuss issues.

Protégé

- Shape the overall agenda for the relationship—know what you want!
- Establish realistic and attainable expectations.
- Be open in communicating with your mentor.
- Establish priority issues for action or support.
- Don’t expect your mentor to be an expert in every facet of business.
- Solicit feedback from your mentor.
- Come prepared to each meeting to discuss issues.

Mentor and Protégé

- Identify roles the mentor can play to help the protégé achieve goals.
- Develop an action plan to achieve agreed upon goals.
- Determine level of structure in the relationship.
- Communicate on a regular basis.
- Set milestones to monitor success of reaching goals.
- Set the agenda for each meeting.
- Schedule formal meetings and cancel only when absolutely necessary.
- Establish guidelines for telephone calls, i.e., calls at home are or are not acceptable.

The next step is to prepare a marketing program, which makes project managers and team members aware of the mentoring program and seeks their input.

Screening, Matching, and Training of Mentors and Mentees

Mentor/mentee partners should be selected/matched according to who is most likely to be compatible. This requires a trusting relationship. Training can then teach them what to do to be successful, and follow-up activities can enhance this.

Applicants should fill out a written application and have a structured interview. Both methods permit applicants to provide open-ended answers to open-ended questions so the program coordinator or steering committee can get to know each applicant as an individual. However, both methods involve much subjectivity and guesswork.

No amount of training or follow-up can offset inappropriate selection and matching. Mentors and protégés

should be selected based on whether their beliefs about mentoring are compatible with the program’s guidelines and expectations. After a trial period, the mentor and mentee can decide that the match is not working and request a change from the program coordinator or steering committee.

The training program includes training for the mentor, the mentee, and for both the mentor and mentee. The mentor training is a one-or-two-day session on the role of the mentor that identifies learning plans and mentoring skills and evaluates the progress of the mentee. Each mentee has a one-day workshop on the role of the mentee, identifying a learning plan and learning style. The mentor and mentee attend an orientation session on developing the relationship, scheduling meetings, and commitment to the program.

Learning Plan Development

The mentor and mentee develop a learning plan. This learning plan includes the skills and competencies to develop and an action plan to develop them. First the mentor conducts a learning-plan interview to determine the skills gap for the project management competencies. The Australian Competency Standards for Project Management model can be used as a guide. Then the learning needs are prioritized and ranges of learning opportunities are identified. The next step is to determine the performance measure to ensure the competence is learned. The last step is to write an action plan and determine when the learning plan will be reviewed.

Performance Measures

Evaluation is just as important for all activities and may well be a requirement for new initiatives and for justifying continued funding. For mentoring, it is comparatively easy to measure the inputs but more difficult to measure the outputs since you can only guess what would have happened without the mentoring relationship. Similarly, it is easy to evaluate how well the mentoring program was administered and more complex to measure how successful were the relationships.

Before considering the detail, there are a few key points to evaluation. Plan what is to be evaluated and how before the mentoring relationship begins; otherwise, you cannot accurately record the early stages. Remember that change does not just happen for the mentee. The relationship will also impact on the mentor and probably the mentee’s line manager and the mentor’s direct reports as

well. You are better off with meaningful qualitative information than unreasoned quantitative information. Ensure there is an effective means of incorporating the feedback to benefit future mentoring relationships.

Effective measurement in mentoring is:

- Relatively unobtrusive
- Valued by all parties as helpful
- Timely
- Straightforward and easy to apply.

Mentoring measurements fall into the four categories below.

1. Relationship processes—what happens in the relationship? For example, how often does the pair meet? Have they developed sufficient trust? Is there a clear sense of direction to the relationship? Does the mentor or the mentee have concerns about their own or the other person's contribution to the relationship?

2. Program processes—for example, how many people attended training? How effective was the training? In some cases, program processes will also include data derived from adding together measurements from individual relationships, to gain a broad picture of what is going well and less well.

3. Relationship outcomes—have the mentor and mentee met the goals they set? (Some adjustment may be needed for legitimate changes in goals as circumstances evolve.)

4. Program outcomes—have we, for example, increased retention of key staff, or raised the competence of the mentees in project management?

The program evaluation occurs throughout the program, one near the start, another in the middle, the next at the end of the program, and the final one six months after the end.

Summary

Whether a team member is full-time or part-time with other functional duties, the time spent on project management activities requires a unique set of skills, competencies, and political discernment. Observing a trusted senior person gives the mentee a safe place to try out ideas, skills, and roles with minimal risk. The knowledge acquired is constantly reinterpreted and developed through practice on real-world project activities.