

## **Free Resource**

### **Mentoring In South Africa Today Brian Jensen**

Interview with Brian Jensen

Mentoring is as old as civilisation. In ancient times a wise old sage would pass on his knowledge to a young man and this would be repeated from generation to generation. Likewise, throughout the ages fathers have handed down their businesses and know-how to their sons. In the modern business environment the same principle is being applied in a more structured, formalised manner.



Mentoring is most commonly a relationship between an expert from within an organisation and a staff member who has been selected to grow under expert guidance. The two will have been carefully matched on the basis of compatibility and mutual affinity and the promise of good chemistry developing between them. Successful matching is essential because this is a very personal kind of relationship.

#### **What gets learned?**

The focus of a mentoring programme is not only on job expertise but also on developing the kind of skills, which are needed by anybody destined for growth and leadership and better performance. Typically, focus areas would include: goal setting, negotiating, communication, managing people, handling conflict, assertiveness, time management, being able to delegate, good listening, pacing and timing correctly, establishing one's credibility in a given field and building workplace resilience.

Such a personal growth programme involves constant goal setting, input and feedback. In addition to workplace expertise, it can include discussing things like physical wellness and may extend to family, social and even spiritual life. Generally learners find that they apply what they are learning in every area of their lives with great success.

Specialised outside help

An outside specialist in this field may be brought in to round off the mentor and protégé with the skills they need to make the relationship fruitful. This is common practice in Europe, the UK and the USA, and gaining momentum in South Africa where mentoring is only now being established more formally, according to Brian Jensen of Executive Coaching and Facilitation in Cape Town. .

“Together with the mentor and the protégé we determine the areas for development. We then define and set goals and structure a learning path that is appropriate to a given situation. “We meet once or twice a week to reflect, share input, problem solve, speeding up or slowing the pace as needed. Feedback and the discussion of problems, issues and challenges are vital elements of the process, as is trust, direction and support.”

Growth and advancement are recognised and celebrated.

Flexibility

Although mentoring normally takes place on a one-on-one basis it must be flexible enough to be extended to small groups if the situation calls for it.

Traps

A mentorship can fail for various reasons. The mentor may be basically unsuited to the task or not had adequate training. He or she may provoke resistance by being too forceful and not listening to or respecting the younger person’s point of view. The relationship can degenerate if the learner does not have her heart in the project and is not responding or completing assignments. It can also fall apart if the mentor is causing frustration by curbing the progress of the learner.

The make up of a mentor

People who make ideal mentor material have an uncommon mix of qualities. They have typically come up through the ranks and have a mindset and perspective that are compatible with those of the company, allowing them to put across its ethos. They have credibility based on their expertise. They are accessible and approachable. They are comfortable with people who wish to learn and enjoy contact with those of a different culture. They are good communicators and, importantly, good listeners. They are secure in themselves and open to sharing their wisdom and giving away their know-how. Although they themselves may know the answers, they easily direct the protégés to discover their own information and to learn for themselves.

Is it worth the while?

The mentoring process rewards all concerned, Brian says.

The protégés get a career head start. Their strengths are recognised and affirmed and they are helped to deal with their weaknesses. They learn to reach for higher levels of achievement and this in turn makes for greater confidence and an improved self-image. They are made aware of pitfalls and thus avoid making mistakes that would have held them back or embarrassed them. Instead of being focused merely on their own function they gain a broad perspective of the organization as a whole.

The mentors have the personal satisfaction of being role models. Their status in the company is expanded and enhanced; making them more valuable, and their own skills are strengthened by the process of teaching them to others.

The company has a more capable and effective staff without having to send its people away on one-size-fits-all courses whose effectiveness is often limited and short-lived because they do not satisfy the specific needs of the organisation, unlike the mentor's coaching which is targeted and focused. Moreover, the learning process of staff members who have undergone mentoring is speeded up so they are able to take on more responsibility earlier than would otherwise have been possible.

Before you start...

There are a number of aspects to consider and have clarity on before a company mentoring programme is implemented, Brian emphasises. "Is management as a whole fully committed to making the project a success and is there someone at top management level who personally champions it? Have criteria been established for the selection of both mentors and learners, and a method formulated for matching them? Have other criteria been determined to measure the success or otherwise of a relationship? Then, are plans in place to respond to failed relationships?" Clear answers to these questions are fundamental to the success of the programme, and this is where the expertise of the professional mentorship trainer-coach comes into his own.

A pitfall

Finally, a pitfall to be avoided when embarking on such a project is to expect a mentoring model that works excellently overseas to give the same results in SA. Textbook models that are successfully applied in countries with largely homogenous populations cannot simply be superimposed in SA where the personnel of any given organization are drawn from widely diverse backgrounds and cultures.

This reality calls for sensitivity when setting up a mentorship programme and is one of the areas to be aware of. Employment equity, affirmative action and skills development are among the factors, which are attended to as a matter of course during a mentorship relationship.

Starting off

The ideal programme will have been adapted and refined to deal effectively both with the unique South African situation and the organisation's own distinctive culture.

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