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## 360° Mentoring

by Elizabeth Collins

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# 360° Mentoring

The ideal mentor is a network of mentors—from all levels of your organization.

by Elizabeth Collins

**F**ifteen years ago, the usual place to look for a mentor was several rungs up the organizational ladder. But today, with org charts flatter and expectations of managerial know-how greater, your ideal mentor may actually be a network of mentors that includes peers and even subordinates. Think of it as the 360° model of mentoring.

“The advice used to be, ‘Go find yourself a mentor,’” says Kathy Kram, professor of organizational behavior at the Boston University School of Management and coeditor of *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work* (Sage, 2007). “Now the advice is to build a small network of five to six individuals who take an active interest in your professional development.”

Here’s the rub, though. Formal mentoring programs are, at best, a mixed success. And even informal mentoring relationships often suffer shipwreck, with one or both parties disillusioned and frustrated. How to construct a mentoring network that delivers results?

## 1. DEFINE GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Before you can find the right mentors, you have to define what you want them to teach you. “Do you want technical or strategic expertise?” asks Leslie Camino-Markowitz, director of Next Generation Leadership Development Programs at Agilent Technologies (Santa Clara, Calif.). “Cultural awareness of how business is done? Perhaps expertise in Asia?”

Narrow your list to four or five objectives; any more, and you’ll have trouble taking in what your mentors have to offer.

Then approach those you would like to have as mentors. Whenever someone agrees to mentor you, clarify expectations upfront. Steve Trautman, author of *Teach What You Know: A Practical Leader’s Guide to Knowledge Transfer Using Peer Mentoring* (Prentice-Hall, 2006), tells an all-too-familiar story:

Ross and Julie are a mentor/protégé pair who have worked together for six months with little progress. They started down this road because one day, their boss had told Ross, “Hey, you should be Julie’s mentor.” Both Ross and Julie are often out of the

### THIS ARTICLE EXPLAINS HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM MENTORING BY:

- Defining learning goals
- Making mentoring relationships reciprocal
- Fostering a learning culture

office at meetings. They never sat down to clarify roles, such as when and how often they would meet and who would set up those conversations. Ross and Julie’s boss did not define the skills that Ross should teach Julie or even topics of conversation. Julie was worried about bothering Ross, and Ross did not want to presume Julie needed help.

For each mentor in your network, spell out what you’d like to learn from him or her and agree on how often you’ll talk and who will be in charge of scheduling the meetings. Keep in mind that you may have stronger or more intensive relationships with some members of your network than with others, says Kram.

## 2. MAKE EVERY MENTORING RELATIONSHIP RECIPROCAL

The old model of mentoring was a one-way street. The mentor might receive satisfaction from teaching, but that was simply a by-product of the process.

The new model is one of reciprocity. Both members of a mentoring relationship have teachable knowledge. Camino-Markowitz illustrates with this story:

A high-potential manager in Europe approached our CFO to be a mentor. The CFO agreed. But part of that agreement was for the protégé to expand the CFO’s breadth of knowledge about the European part of the organization. The protégé invited the CFO to Europe, accompanied him on a tour, and set up connections that gave the CFO better insight

into that part of the business.

“Some of the more successful mentoring pairs define the level of reciprocity in the mentoring commitment in advance,” says Donna Flagg, cofounder of The Krysalis Group, a New York City-based consultancy. “The mentor and the protégé may agree at the start to spend 80% of their time on the protégé’s needs and 20% on the mentor’s in order to get the most out of the relationship.”

### 3. REGULARLY EVALUATE PROGRESS

In every mentoring relationship, chemistry comes into play. Do the two parties click? Similarities in background, experiences, or personality can help forge an initial connection, just as they do in personal relationships. But the connection between two people can also develop from a shared commitment to the mentoring relationship.

To document that commitment, Trautman suggests that a mentoring pair use a training plan that deconstructs what the protégé needs to learn into a list of specific skills and knowledge sets. Such a plan forces the mentor to replace vague phrases such as “live in the database” or “support the customer” with a list of skills that can be mutually understood and taught.

Because people’s needs change, Kram recommends regular check-ins. Every quarter, the mentor and protégé should ask each other, “Is this working for us? Should we continue as we were, adjust, or move on?”

There is never enough time, it seems, and many mentoring relationships suffer as a result. Instead of fuming over missed commitments, says Camino-Markowitz, the protégé should tell the mentor when things are not working. “Hold the mentor accountable to their commitment,” she says, “and let them off the hook if they cannot continue the two-way relationship.” She tells the story of a protégé who took this approach with a senior-level mentor. “That initiative turned the relationship around, resulting in deeper commitment and mutual respect. The mentor decided to continue but under different terms.”

Ending a successful mentoring relationship can

### HOW TO FOSTER A MENTORING-FRIENDLY CULTURE

James Hunt, associate professor of management at Babson College (Wellesley, Mass.), offers these suggestions for creating a culture that encourages mentoring:

- Recognize members of your group who successfully mentored their colleagues in your group or in the larger organization.
- Include mentoring achievements—for both the mentor and the protégé—in performance evaluations.
- Understand that you can learn much of value from those you lead.

be harder than walking away from a failing one, but recognizing when it is right to take this step is important.

James Hunt, associate professor of management at Babson College (Wellesley, Mass.), tells of an individual contributor who had the goal of becoming a manager. With the help of her mentor, she succeeded. Instead of explaining to her mentor at this point that she no longer needed the relationship, she kept silent but stopped scheduling time with him. He was offended and hurt by her behavior. What she should have done instead is simply said, “Thank you very much for your help. I don’t want to take more of your time on this, but I’d like to stay in touch and let you know how things go.”

Serving as a mentor is “an act of citizenship,” says Hunt. Protégés need to reciprocate in kind by thanking their mentors for their time, energy, and assistance, and helping them “transition to the next phase of the relationship.” ♦

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