

ARTICLE FOR WIIT NEWSLETTER APRIL

WHY MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS FAIL

Structured mentoring programmes, such as the one run by Women in IT, involve “matching” a mentor to a mentee – usually through the choice of the mentee. Sometimes, despite good intentions from all involved, the ensuing mentoring relationship runs into problems, and then sometimes collapses. What might have gone wrong?

Clarity of purpose is critical for energising the relationship. Most relationships require a clear sense of purpose and a defined transition, which the mentee wishes to achieve. The clearer that transition is, the more focused the discussions and the easier it is to relate day-to-day issues to the larger goal. Even in relationships, where the primary objective is for the mentee simply to have an occasional sounding board, unless that is agreed up front, one or both parties will feel dissatisfied.

Commitment by both parties is an essential pre-requisite. The purpose or objective of the mentee has to be important enough for the mentee to devote time and energy to preparing for, being an active participant in and following up on the mentoring meetings. Similarly, the mentor must be motivated enough to devote similar time and energy – this motivation usually is triggered by the motivation of the mentee – the more motivated the mentee, the more motivated the mentor. For example, a mentee who misses scheduled meetings is surely not committed to the relationship and the mentor would find it difficult to remain motivated to help under such conditions.

An appropriate balance between being directive and laissez faire needs to be maintained by the mentor. Indeed, a core skill for a mentor is to recognise when to lead and when to enable the mentee to lead discussions. One of the most common complaints by mentees is that the mentor talks at them, rather than engages them in reflective dialogue. Less common, but equally dysfunctional, is the mentor, who never gives advice and is unable to adapt style to the mentee's needs at the time.

Failure to build rapport will undermine any mentoring relationship. It is important to spend time up front getting to know each other and to reinforce this rapport regularly for the duration of the relationship. It is true that sometimes a mentor or mentee simply doesn't like the other person. Sometimes that can be overcome by focusing on the mentee's objectives. But sometimes it is fatal and in this case, both parties should recognise the problem and reach agreement to terminate. We call this “no fault divorce”.

Too shallow conversations - inability or unwillingness by one or both parties to address the significant issues.

Most of these issues can be managed through training and through proactive follow up of relationships by the programme coordinator. The most successful mentoring programmes train both mentors and mentees .

The figures are stark. Without any training at all, less than one in three pairings will deliver significant results for either party. Training mentors alone raises the success rate to around 65%. Training both and educating line managers about the programme pushed the success rate above 90%, with both parties reporting substantial gains.

One reason for training both parties is so that mentees have the expectation gradually to acquire the confidence and skills to manage the relationship; and so that mentors know how to help them do so. Developmental mentoring, in particular, demands that the mentee helps the mentor to help them, by understanding the process and contributing to it.

Initial training is rarely enough to give mentors more than a basic level of competence and confidence. Experience of hundreds of programmes in more than three dozen countries shows that they both want and need access to continued expert advice on how to do the role and develop their skills; and that they greatly value the opportunity to share experience with other mentors.

Women in IT is offering regular short training sessions for mentors and mentees and, on demand, will offer refresher and review sessions.