

Mentoring: Benefits and Considerations

One of the most daunting challenges in Federal workforce management is effective employee development: helping employees continually hone their knowledge and skills to successfully perform their work, reach their potential, and maximize their contributions to mission accomplishment. Yet, when time, energy, or financial resources are scarce, employee development tends to get pushed to the proverbial back burner as employees (and their supervisors) focus on meeting immediate needs. In some cases, this may be because of misperceptions about the range and practicality of available employee development options. For example, mentoring is a popular and relatively low cost tool for employee development that can not only assist agencies in cultivating the talents of their workforce, but can be instrumental in supporting knowledge transfer from tenured, soon-to-retire staff to less seasoned staff. The recently issued final regulations¹ for phased retirement in Government convey the importance of mentoring: a condition for participating in the phased retirement program is mentoring other employees.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a “formal or informal interpersonal developmental relationship where one person assists in the growth and advancement of another person.”² Usually the relationship is between a more experienced individual (the mentor) and a less experienced individual (the mentee).³ Mentoring relationships can be either formal or informal. Informal mentoring occurs when the mentor and mentee select each other and the mentoring relationship evolves naturally. In comparison, formal mentoring relationships typically arise through agency programs where the mentor and mentee are matched by a third party (*e.g.*, HR staff, management committee). Overall, the formal mentoring relationship tends to be considerably more structured than the informal mentoring relationship and is managed and supported by the agency.⁴ While some research supports that informal mentoring relationships are more successful than formal ones, both types have shown that the mentor, mentee, and agency can benefit.⁵

What are the benefits of mentoring?

When appropriately implemented, mentoring can bring an array of benefits. For mentors, there can be improvements in coaching, counseling, listening, and role modeling skills⁶ while mentees can experience enhanced organizational socialization and job

¹ Phased Retirement, 79 Fed. Reg. 46,608 (Aug. 8, 2014).

² Mullen, E.J. (1994). Framing the mentoring relationship as an information exchange. *Human Resource Management Review*, 4(3), 257-281.

³ Eby, L.T.. (2011) Mentoring. In S. Zedeck (Editor-in-Chief), *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Selecting and Developing Member for the Organization*, (Vol.2, pp. 505-525). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

⁴ Chao, G.T., Walz, P.M., & Gardner, P.D. (1992). Formal and informal mentorship: A comparison of mentoring functions and contrast with nonmentored counterparts. *Personnel Psychology*, 45, 619-636.

⁵ Id.

⁶ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Best Practices: Mentoring*, September 2008.

satisfaction.⁷ Mentees can also gain crucial job knowledge, experience, and networking opportunities. Agencies can benefit by building employee skills, preparing leaders for the next level or expanded leadership roles, increasing organization attractiveness for recruitment, increasing retention, and supporting a continuous learning environment.⁸ Agencies can also benefit from knowledge transfer. Below we discuss some actions that agencies can take to increase the potential for a successful mentorship process.

What are the key considerations for mentoring?

The following practices have been identified as useful at different stages in a formal⁹ mentoring program.

Program Development

- Determine the purpose and goals of the mentoring program (*e.g.*, acclimation to agency culture, skills building, leadership development, and improved employee retention). These goals will serve as the foundation for how the program should be structured, who should participate, and how success will be evaluated.
- Gain top leadership support. In general, employee development programs that are supported by top leadership are more likely to be taken seriously by employees across all levels within the agency and are more likely to succeed. Seek visible support from top management (*e.g.*, verbal and written communication, allocation of human and financial resources, personal involvement).

Selection of Participants

- Allow mentors to volunteer for the program. Since the role of mentor is time consuming and personally demanding, it may be best to assign mentor roles only to those who volunteer. If mentors are forced into the role, the level of commitment and quality of mentoring may suffer.
- Ensure that individuals who volunteer to be mentors have the appropriate skill set for this important role. Not everyone has the personal characteristics to be a good mentor (*e.g.*, good communication skills, patience, interest in developing others, ability to provide constructive feedback) or the skill set the agency may want developed in others (*e.g.*, networking ability, customer service orientation). Therefore, consider using an assessment to select who will be a mentor using pre-established criteria that align with agency goals for the program.
- Selection of mentees may be voluntary or mandatory. However, benefits of mentoring for mentees notwithstanding, it is probably best to encourage voluntary participation in the mentoring program whenever possible. Learning, whether

⁷ Id.

⁸ Gaskill, L.R. (1993). A conceptual framework for the development, implementation, and evaluation of formal mentoring programs. *Journal of Career Development*, 20, pp. 147-160.

⁹ We chose to focus on formal mentoring programs since this is the arrangement over which the agency can most readily exercise control.

through mentoring or any other training and development activity, typically occurs best when there is interest and engagement from the participant.

Match Participants

- Allow mentors and mentees to provide input into the matching process. Participants in the mentoring relationship may be able to identify and select those individuals with whom they can work most comfortably and effectively. Input in the process may engender stronger commitment to the relationship.
- Provide mentors and mentees with background information (*e.g.*, education, hometown, interests, occupations, career paths, work styles) to help them determine which participants may be a good match for them. Perceived similarities and shared backgrounds can be helpful in initiating the mentoring relationship.

Program Implementation

- Provide a clear explanation of the purpose and goals of the mentoring program (*e.g.*, what the program intends to accomplish, how to use the mentoring relationship as a developmental tool, what the mentee may or may not gain from participation in the program) as well as mentor and mentee roles and responsibilities. This explanation can help mitigate the potential for disappointment with the program due to unmet expectations (*e.g.*, completion of the program does not guarantee salary increases or promotions).
- Have mentor and mentee develop a mentoring agreement that documents the key terms of the relationship. It may contain topics related to specific roles, responsibilities, expectations, products (*e.g.*, goals, action plans), a mechanism for terminating the relationship, and confidentiality.
- Have mentor and mentee determine the frequency (*e.g.*, as needed, scheduled meetings) of their interactions. The mentor and mentee are in the best position to determine the level of interaction that is appropriate for them considering such factors as level of guidance and support needed and work load.
- Request on-going feedback from mentors and mentees on their evolving relationship, inquiring about factors such as respect, trust, learning, and quality of interactions. Such feedback is important to ensure that the relationship is functioning properly or to make adjustments if necessary.

Program Evaluation

- Obtain feedback from mentors, mentees, and possibly other stakeholders (*e.g.*, mentee's supervisor, HR) on dimensions of program effectiveness. Consider evaluating issues such as participant satisfaction with the program, internal and external impressions of the mentoring program, progress toward program goals, lessons learned, and recommendations for improvement.
- Analyze human resources data for evidence that the mentoring program is fulfilling its intended purpose or goals (*e.g.*, reduced turnover rate of mentees compared to employees in comparable jobs who did not have mentors, higher engagement scores for mentees and mentors).

Mentoring can bring an array of important benefits at a reasonable cost, but effective mentoring requires a baseline investment of time and work. However, given the importance of workforce development for continued mission success and the perpetual need to encourage knowledge transfer from seasoned to novice employees, that investment is worthwhile even when belt-tightening is necessary.

Resources for Additional Information about Mentoring

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