Designing a Mentoring Program That Works

Once seen as a luxury for only the largest corporations, mentoring programs are quickly becoming a must-have in today's war for talent. As more companies wrestle with ways to keep the 'free agent' workforce satisfied, a well-planned mentoring program can improve a company's culture and dramatically reduce turnover, while a poorly designed program can create more problems than it's worth.

Below are tips for designing a mentoring program that works, including some lessons from companies that have started their own.

Recommendation	Approach
Make a strong business case for mentoring	Deloitte & Touche, the accounting, tax and consulting firm, documented the business imperative back in 1993. Half of their new hires were women and almost all of them had left before they became partner candidates; and they didn't leave to have children. The CEO and partners decided that if they were to grow the business, they were going to have to change the culture.
The CEO must be the enthusiastic champion	A mentoring program is often viewed as the HR program du jour. Unless there is a strong, credible person at the helm, the initiative will feel like one more add-on to an already full schedule. If there is a task force, it must be led by someone from the senior team.
Design a program that fits your culture	At Foley & Lardner, a large national law firm, each new lawyer is assigned two mentors; one who has been with the firm for more than ten years and another who has worked there for a few years. The more seasoned lawyer helps them understand the culture and can make introductions; the second mentor helps them with making presentations and other work-related advice. These two mentors even attend their mentee's performance review. While in most hierarchies this level of involvement would not be appropriate, it is perceived as supportive in their flat organizational structure.
Focus on real issues, challenges and specific areas of development	If the program is simply a "feel good" program, there is less likelihood it will be taken seriously. At Johnson Controls, mentees and mentors complete profiles and then are matched by a team of managers and HR staff. The goal is to match the mentee's specific developmental need with that of a mentor who is skilled in that area.
Provide on-going training and other resources for both mentees and mentors	Time Warner Cable provides training sessions for mentors in order to understand their role and effectively manage the relationship. They also train mentor-mentee pairs to help them maximize their partnership. Mentees also attend training, to help them make the most of the mentoring experience.

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Integrate the mentor program with all other development activities	The program will be more successful if it is connected to succession planning, performance reviews, 360-degree feedback processes, promotions, challenging assignments, job rotations and other activities. In addition, providing all employees with development opportunities will keep the mentor program from being viewed as elitist.
Use a flexible system of accountability	Senior managers should have input into the areas they want to focus on in their departments. For instance, there may be a corporate-wide initiative for mentoring women, but the IT department head may also have a special need in his area to create some mentoring opportunities for his technical professionals.
Spell out the roles and responsibilities for participants	Mentors should not get between mentees and their managers or get overly involved in the detail of the mentee's work. Mentees need to understand that having a mentor doesn't guarantee that they will get promoted or have unlimited access to their mentor. Johnson Controls uses case studies in mentor training to prevent misunderstandings like these.
Make mentor programs voluntary	Mandating mentor or mentee responsibilities is doomed to failure. The mentor must be enthusiastic and willing or he/she will do more harm than good. Mentees need to be willing to accept responsibility for their own career and be willing to accept their mentor's help. If someone wants to opt-out of the program, they should be able to.
Keep the program flexible	Strike a balance between formal events and informal sessions. The benefits of mentoring are found in the private, one-on-one sessions. Too much bureaucracy can sabotage it.