

# Build a Mentoring Culture

## People Development

By Judith Lindenberger

The people in your organizations train for years and go into debt for college. People work late nights and weekends. People spend the entire day taking phone calls when they're supposed to be on vacation. And people generate ideas and create the solutions that your organizations need.

People do these things. The people you have working for you today and the people you may hire tomorrow. And, the people who may resign because no one has recognized their abilities.

Yet, clearly, organizations do not do a good enough job developing and promoting their most important resource – their people.

What does it take to develop your people?

It takes more than writing "equal opportunity" into your organization's mission statement. It takes more than sending someone to a training class. It takes more than hard work on the part of your employees. What development takes is people – from the CEO's office to the mailroom – people who are willing to listen and to help their colleagues. Development takes coaches; it takes guide; it takes advocates. Development depends on mentors.

Time after time, successful people I talk to say that one of the most important keys to their success is having a mentor. It is hard to make it without a mentor and it takes too much time without a mentor.

But often there is no mentor around when you need one and especially when you face "particular challenges." What do I mean when I talk about the "particular challenges" that people in organizations face?

## Challenges That Need Mentoring

Let me give you a few examples of some challenges we working people all deal with. Imagine that you are facing these situations. How would you react?

First scenario. You've been working in a staff job and a line job opens up in another city. It would be a perfect career move for you but the company fills the job without even asking if you're interested. They don't ask because they assume your spouse wouldn't want to leave his or her job to relocate. What would you do?

Or imagine this. You're in a meeting. It's your opportunity to shine in front of upper management. You've got an important point to make and you start to talk. Someone cuts you off. What would you do?

Or let's say you make that important point—and no one says a word about it. But five minutes later, a guy at the other end of the table says the same thing you did. This time it's a brilliant idea, and he gets all the credit. What would you do?

You're in another meeting — there's always another meeting - and one of your bosses tells a demeaning joke about the Pope - you are Catholic, and everyone knows it. What would you do?

Or a joke about gays — which you are, and maybe no one knows it. Or a joke about women — which you're not, but some of your colleagues sitting right next to you are. What would you do?

My point is not so much whether you or I know how to react in each of these situations. My point is really that we need to recognize that there are people in every organization — whether they're men or women, minorities, or people who grew up without any business role-models in their lives — who don't know how to react in these situations.

And it's our responsibility to teach them.

Organizations are only as successful as the men and women who make them work.

So, if we care about our organizations and our people, we have to share our knowledge of the organizational culture; we have to share our wisdom; we have to mentor.

### **Mentoring Best Practices**

If you want to establish a mentoring culture within your organization, here are some mentoring best practices.

- Set organizational goals. Don't establish a mentoring program just because it is a good business practice. Develop a mentoring program based on solid business goals such as increasing diversity or making your organization a better place to work.
- Find out why the talented employees you wanted to keep left you.
- McKinsey and Co. asked top people what they look for when deciding which company to join and stay with. The answer: a great company and a great job. Talented employees want exciting challenges and great development opportunities. They leave because they are bored. Mentoring is a key to attracting and retaining talented employees.
- Develop people to their fullest potential. In order to develop your people, provide training opportunities, challenging projects and assignments, feedback, coaching and mentoring. In one study with people who had experienced real mentors, half of them said the mentoring experience "changed my life." Those are powerful words.
- Foster mentoring for women and minorities. Ten years ago, when I began a new job, I sat with female colleagues during company presentations, and wondered, "Why are the guys up there and we're not?" One of my first job assignments was to develop and manage a mentoring program. We included a special group mentoring program for women. Today, many of the young women I knew ten years ago at that company, have, in fact, climbed onto the stage themselves. Mentoring helped move women into the ranks of vice president, senior vice president and division president.
- Point to the money. Losing talented employees and wasting talent costs companies money.

And remember, whatever programs you design; they won't be effective unless there is commitment from the top. Visible, daily commitment.