



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

by

Audrey J. Murrell, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Business Administration
Psychology, Public & International Affairs
University of Pittsburgh, Katz School of Business
Email: amurrell@katz.pitt.edu

Mentoring has gained attention and popularity as a powerful tool to enable the careers of those advancing through the ranks in all types of organizations. Those with access to mentoring consistently are known to benefit from their involvement in these relationships. Research shows that people with mentors report higher salaries, more frequent promotions, higher job satisfaction, stronger commitment to their organization and are less likely to want to leave their jobs than those without mentors.ⁱ So it makes sense that firms that invest in mentoring programs are often among the firms recognized as the best places to work among their competitors.

However, there is an additional reason why mentoring is important for one's career and for the overall effectiveness of any organization. In spite of the increased number of people of color entering organizations and the clear need to retain diverse talent, we still see a glass ceiling that effectively keeps the top levels of Corporate America devoid of the diversity that exists throughout the middle and lower levels. This glass ceiling has been called a concrete ceiling—an impermeable barrier that keeps people of color effectively locked out of the corridors of top positions across industries and professions. In organizations committed to diversity, mentoring is often used as a catalyst to shift the dynamics of power that keep people of color from attaining those executive level positions in substantive numbers. Mentoring relationships are clearly one of the keys to success for the few executives of color that have successfully broken through this difficult and persistent barrier.ⁱⁱ



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

What stands in the way of effective mentoring relationships? Very often it is the myth about the purpose and functions of mentoring. The original concept of a “mentor” was based on a character from Greek mythology, namely, Homer’s story of the Odyssey. Within this story, a goddess appears in different forms to help guide, protect and support the journey of the main character within the story. This all-knowing and powerful figure that Homer describes as “Mentor,” has shaped our modern-day expectations and perceptions of what a mentor does – or more importantly what a mentor should do. However, it is helpful to have a realistic understanding of what is meant when the term “mentoring” is used in today’s organizations.

Mentoring is not about finding a perfect match or even a single relationship. A more useful definition of mentoring is: *A collaborative relationship between two or more individuals that supports the career and/or personal development throughout one’s career.* This definition is important for several reasons. First, it reminds us that mentoring is about a relationship – it is both dynamic and reciprocal. In effective mentoring relationships, there is an exchange, and both the mentor and the protégé benefit. Relationships are also dynamic which means that mentoring must and will change over time. A focus on the “relationship” aspect of this definition reminds us that mentoring must be cultivated, and requires active participation of both the mentor and the protégé. The third part of this definition directs our attention to the need for developing more than one relationship. Mentoring that helps to support your career requires not just a single mentor but also a *network of mentoring relationships*. This is because the functions of mentoring are quite diverse, making it impossible for a single individual to provide all that you will need across your entire career. Let’s take a look at these various functions that were identified by a researcher named Kathy Kramⁱⁱⁱ to get a better idea of the diverse kinds of mentoring relationships that you must cultivate.



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

The traditional function of a mentor is sponsorship. This involves providing career-focused support for your advancement in the organization or within the profession. Mentors who are sponsors may help you attain desirable positions, use his/her influence to support your advancement in the organization, or provide opportunities that support your professional development. Frequently, formal mentoring programs can provide you with a powerful sponsor. What is important to remember about sponsorship is that while everyone needs a sponsor (or sponsors), that sponsor may not provide some of the personal or emotional support that you also need throughout your career. Sponsors are a valuable resource, but that is not the only resource you will need.

Coaching is also a mentoring function. A mentor who is providing coaching is acting as your career advisor. This type of mentoring relationship focuses on task and performance-related skills and the enhancement of specific work competencies. Here a mentor may help you to learn about other parts of the organization or give you advice about how to perform within the organization or profession more effectively. Coaches may also provide specific suggestions for enhancing performance in your job. Some people argue that your direct supervisor should be your coach and to some extent this is true. But in order for you to be most effective, having a number of different coaches who help to provide specific advice across a variety of areas, and provide instruction on how to improve your performance, is the best approach to take.

A frequently overlooked function of mentoring is protection. Especially for people of color in organizations, having a champion or advocate is critical. This is often the “invisible” mentoring function where the mentor serves as a buffer for negative career outcomes or damaging consequences within the organization. When mentoring relationships involve protection, the mentor “runs interference” for you within the organization, and can shield you



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

from damaging contact or actions from others. Protection may also mean buffering you from failure that may hinder your career. Keep in mind that not all individuals can provide protection. This mentoring function has a lot to do with power and influence within the organization. Also, keep in mind that this may have nothing to do with title or position in the company. Frequently people in so-called “lower level positions” are powerful sources of protection. For example, reciprocal relationships with a secretary or administrative assistant can provide this important mentoring function. Also, an important customer or client relationship can provide you with protection.

Another career-focused mentoring function is exposure/visibility. A mentor who provides exposure and visibility for you, helping you to effectively network. This mentoring function is about linking you to opportunities to show your talent or knowledge, expand your social networks, and contributes to building your positive reputation within the organization. In providing exposure/visibility, mentoring relationships help you to be more visible within the organization, and may create opportunities for you to show important people in the organization the value that you add to the firm. This is an important function, especially for women and people of color who may be locked out of informal networks, so the value and work they contribute may not be visible or known compared to their white counterparts.

Mentoring relationships also provide social and emotional support for you throughout your career. For example, another mentoring function is that of role modeling, which involves a personal benchmark that helps you learn and develop. Role modeling provides an exemplar or prototype of valued organizational norms, attributions or competencies. This is not about finding a “hero,” but about how you gain knowledge from a relationship that provides an example of how to be effective and successful. Role models provide someone that you can identify with,



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

learn from and get concrete information from, on how to be successful within the specific culture of your organization. Role models are invaluable learning tools for you.

Mentoring relationships can also provide acceptance and confirmation. One way to think about this is having connections with people who provide you with validation and support. Here a mentor gives you validation of your knowledge, skills, experience and overall contribution to the organization. This acceptance can be critical for those who are few in numbers, work in isolation, work in a non-supportive work environment, or feel left out of the informal network within the company. A mentoring relationship that provides confirmation means that you are accepted as a competent professional who is knowledgeable and deserving of your rank, position and influence. Don't underestimate the importance of validation. Everyone needs a network of people who support and celebrate their accomplishments. This is acceptance and confirmation.

Clearly work-related support is important, but non-work related support is also vital. The mentoring function known as counseling involves people who act as sounding boards for you throughout your career. A counselor provides advice that extends across professional and personal boundaries of one's life. This mentoring function helps you to address work-life balance or work-family spillover issues. Often these are the types of issues that you don't want to talk over with a boss or direct supervisor. Counselors are trusted advisors who help you understand and sort out all of life's challenges and opportunities, not just those that are work-related. These types of mentoring relationships take longer to develop because there must be a stronger level of trust for counseling than any of the other mentoring functions we have discussed.

Clearly, you see how diverse and complicated the various mentoring relationships can be, and why no single relationship can meet all of your development needs. Now that we understand



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

the various functions of mentoring, here are *five key steps* that you should keep for cultivating effective mentoring relationships.

- 1) Assess your needs.** First, you must assess the current state of your mentoring relationships. What relationships do you currently have? How do these relationships compare in terms of the different types of functions being provided? Before you begin to work on developing new relationships, sit down and take inventory of your current relationships. Identify the specific mentoring functions that these relationships provide, and what functions are missing. This step is a type of “gap analysis” that can help you target your future efforts and provide important insight.
- 2) Set goals and clarify expectations.** After you have completed your inventory, identify some goals in terms of what you want to accomplish. This means looking at the current state of your mentoring relationships and setting some goals regarding what is missing and how you might want to fill those gaps. Think about people you have known or worked with, and have lost contact with. Also, remember peers in different functions, departments or locations. Don’t forget relationships both inside and outside of your organization. Set some goals that are specific and realistic. This will help you keep track of your actions and also make sure you are being realistic in your plans.
- 3) Focus on cultivating a relationship.** Once you have set your goals, begin the process of cultivating relationships. Don’t simply contact a person on your list and ask him/her “will you be my coach?” or, “can you mentor me?” You must work at cultivating mentoring relationships in the same manner as you would any other relationship. Find out what is important or going on in this person’s career or life.



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

Look for common interests or activities. First, work toward understanding the needs and interests of the other person. This is the most important step for the initial contact and working to form an effective relationship. Focus on the needs of the other person first – then ask for their help, advice and support.

- 4) Seek opportunities to maintain contact.** Remember, this is a relationship first and foremost. So that means you have to put in some work in order for it to be successful. Too often we wait for the other person, particularly if he/she is more experienced, to make the initial contact and drive the relationship. This is a wrong approach. Relationships are a mutual endeavor, which means that you must actively seek opportunities to interact and engage. You must work at building the connection. Yes, this requires time, but if you want an effective relationship you must actively participate in its development. This may be a challenge for more introverted individuals, but keep in mind the goal is the quality of your relationship, not the quantity of your relationships. The strength of the relationship matters, so focus on a few connections to get you started here.
- 5) Develop a mentoring network.** As you are working, remember the key word is relationships (plural). Don't focus on connecting to that one powerful person at the top of the organizational chart. In fact, peer relationships are often overlooked but can frequently be more beneficial in providing many of the important functions that you will need. The important point here is that you need many diverse types of relationships in order to provide the best resources for you and your career development. Not only do you need relationships across the various functions, but also both inside and outside of the organization; with people in your same profession



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

and in different ones, and relationships across diversity boundaries such as gender, race, age and social class. Building a diverse network of relationships will help you get the most power out of mentoring.

These five steps should help guide you on the way to developing effective mentoring relationships. Keep in mind that mentoring relationships can be very important resources for you and your professional development^{iv}. At the end of this article you will find some references that may be helpful as you discover the power of mentoring. One additional piece of advice is to remember that *“relationships require cultivation and cultivation takes time.”* You must make an investment in order to receive the enormous return that effective mentoring relationships can provide. No investment, no return. Mentoring relationships can be mutually beneficial, but they require your time, energy and commitment. The time to start investing in your future mentoring relationships is now.



Five Key Steps for Effective Mentoring Relationships

References

-
- ⁱ Murrell, A. J., Crosby, F.J., and Ely, R.J. (1999). *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships Within Multicultural Organizations*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- ⁱⁱ Thomas, D.A. & Gabarro, J.J. (1999). *Breaking Through: The Making of Minority Executives in Corporate America*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kram, K.E. (1988). *Mentoring At Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc.
- ^{iv} Ensher, E.A. and Murphy, S.E. (2006). *Power Mentoring: How Successful Mentors and Protégés Get the Most Out of Their Relationships*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.



Walter Kaitz Foundation
25 Massachusetts Avenue, NW - Suite 100
Washington, DC 20001
Phone: (202) 222-2490
Fax: (202) 222-2491
Email: info@walterkaitz.org
Website: www.walterkaitz.org