Companies, schools revive lost art of mentoring

BY KAREN JANNET COHEN
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The best mentor of low may be King Arthur's Merlin, who turned the monarchy into a fish and a bird and taught his secret arts far beyond the sweepstake and horsemanship imparted to his peers. Despite the unlikelihood of a modern guide having such talents, today's fledgling executives can still find their own wiserwise wizards who, with luck, can teach novices practices that can mean the difference between professional success and failure.

Although mentoring has been around for quite a while, there has been a recent surge in the practice, say human resources experts. Companies and business schools increasingly view mentors—part teacher, part coach, part friend—as crucial.

"More companies are instituting formal mentoring programs to give greater control of the socialization process of employees," said Calvin Krook, senior assistant professor of management and international business at Florida International University. Krook is also an industrial and organizational psychologist and a human resources consultant.

Among the companies that have recently signed on to the merits of mentoring is Milwaukee-based Burger King Corp., which has instituted an in-house mentoring program that helps develop talent in the middle ranks.

"It sends a signal to employees that you value them and you are willing to invest corporate resources," said Kim Miller, Burger King senior director of external communications.

Corporations see mentoring as the best way to transmit a company's corporate culture to its next generation, said Jack Scarborough, dean of the Anderson School of Business and a professor of management at Barry University.

"There are a lot of unwritten rules in any organization that you are not going to find in the company's handbook," he said. For instance—knowing where to put the boss down his morning coffee, before popping into his office—"a nifty Scarborough way of doing things." Scarborough said he made early in his career: "Companies are increasingly relying on nurture and values to replace written rules."

The importance of mentoring is catching on at the business schools as well. For example, Barry, which offers both undergraduate and graduate business degrees, runs its own mentoring program, which is in its third session with about 100 students, said Susan Fernandez, who runs the school's program as well as internships and study abroad programs.

"Mentors, many of them alumni, are matched with students in the same field; such as a vice president of accounting with an accounting student. Mentors are expected to talk to their protégés about career paths, job demands, and how to develop communication and leadership skills," Fernandez said.

But what's a young executive to do if his or her company doesn't have a formal mentoring program? Fernandez and Scarborough both recommend that, in the absence of a formal mentoring program, new hires look for a company veteran with a good reputation who shares their professional views and philosophy. It also helps to pick someone involved in company extracurricular affairs, such as an employee welfare committee.

A good approach, said Scarborough, is to ask a candidate business-related questions and conduct the discussion, thoughtfully and answers lead the way to more questions, and eventually a relationship builds.

"Use people with some grey hair," Scarborough said.

Professionalism on both sides is a must, particularly if you want potentially dicey pitfalls, such as inappropriate intimacies.

"If a person doesn't share your professional views and values, that would be a great warning sign," Fernandez said.

"If there is a lack of chemistry, you know it is not going to work," she said.

For example, she said, she has seen pairings that are a mismatch between the student and mentor's motivational levels. Sometimes mentors are too busy or not as motivated to answer questions. Or a poor match might include a mentor who is a micro manager and a protege who likes to be autonomous.

On the other hand, a good mentoring relationship can last decades, said Elizabeth DeMarse, president and CEO of Bankrate Inc., on online consumer finance marketplace in North Palm Beach. One of her most important mentors was Michael Bloomberg, the head of Bloomberg L.P., a media conglomerate where DeMarse was an executive vice president.

"I learned 90 percent of my operating skills from Michael," DeMarse said, who met the mogul early in her career with his wife.

"At this stage of my career, I have as many as a dozen people, whom I turn to for advice, guidance and suggestions, whom I make contact with on a regular basis," she said. "Becoming a public company CEO was extremely new to me. Some of the people who mentored me before were particularly useful. I talked to them about how to handle the board, schedule board meetings, my relationship to the board.

DeMarse, who joined Bankrate in the spring of 2000 when it was facing serious financial problems, said mentors helped her decide whether or not to accept the job.

For example, Mark Talbot, chairman of the Board, Penn., software firm VerticalNet, was a terrific coach, she said. "I had breakfast with Mark last fall when the Internet was falling apart, and I was explaining how I planned to turn the company around, and he helped me refine that mission," she said.

DeMarse believes it is more difficult for women to find mentors. "Women may not be
as comfortable calling people and saying, 'Let's have breakfast,'” she said. “I do that all the time. I've done it for years.”

Women who are anxious to prove themselves tend to put their heads down, work hard and not worry about networking, she said. But, she added, if one takes the time to get to know people, a relationship develops that can often turn into a mentoring opportunity.

The influx of women and minorities into the executive suites has led to a rise in formal mentoring programs, said FIU's Kroeck. He adds that firms eager to have women and minorities succeed see mentoring as essential. Firms are also realizing that unless given positive role models, new employees may get information elsewhere.

“If a company does not take control of the socialization process, someone will take on that role. If you don't have the high-performance people doing the mentoring, you may end up with low-performance people transmitting the culture,” Kroeck said.

Many achievers are quick to mention mentors as an ingredient of their success. Scott Adams, who founded the Boca Raton-based high-tech business incubator Gene- tec after building and selling Hiway Technologies for several hundred million dollars, said that two people stand out among many who helped him along the way. One — a client of the interior design firm where Adams worked out of college — impressed Adams with his kind but firm leadership as head of a family business.

The man demonstrated that one can manage in such a way that “you expect results, and you have a process you go through to make a change,” he said. For example, when the mentor, whom Adams preferred not to name, was unhappy with some of the subcontracting work, “he would be very calm about it, explain his position.”

Adams' second mentor was Jeffrey Graham, the founder of Boca Raton-based JTECH Communications Systems, best known for making the paging devices restaurants give customers awaiting tables. Adams had worked as a consultant for Graham who provided advice, guidance and office space for his newborn Hiway Technologies, a Web hosting firm.

At Genetec, Adams more or less functions as a mentor to all 10 of the companies under its wing. “I get unlimited opportunity to help,” he said. Recently, he spent an afternoon meeting with the CEO of one Genetec company helping him with the hiring of a COO, explaining to the CEO how to respond to an unexpected counteroffer, how to evaluate the context of a severance package and how to close the deal.

Protéges who are successful often find that their own experience with a mentor prompts a willingness to be one for other people at the start their careers.

Adams' mentor, Graham, who retired from JTECH a year ago, said that his father, who owned a Connecticut advertising agency, was his own most important mentor. A very sociable man, Hugh Graham taught his son people skills and how to put associates and clients at ease. More important, Graham said, his father insisted on “values and respect for people, and doing what you say you are going to do.”

“Your personal reward,” Graham said, “is to see someone grow and succeed.”

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**THE MENTOR SEARCH**

- Look for a company veteran with a good reputation
- Be sure the would-be mentor shares your professional views and business philosophy
- Pick someone involved in company extracurricular activity
- Schedule Q&A sessions with a candidate and spend time together to build a relationship
- Chemistry matters, a poor match might include a mentor who is a micromanager and a protégé who likes to work independently