

HOW NETWORKING CAN HELP YOUR CAREER



Formal mentoring typically is a one-way process. Companies arrange for seasoned executives to pass along their knowledge and expertise to promising neophytes.

But in our fast-paced, fluid and dynamic environment, this process is failing companies. Formal mentoring is too structured to meet the needs of protégés in rapidly changing businesses, and many mentors are too busy to keep up the relationship. Like companies, mentoring needs to change to become faster and more efficient.

To advance your career in the current market and gain expertise from professionals who understand the problems you're encountering, you must create a "learning network" composed of many professional and personal contacts. This will speed the flow of critical information to you, and harness the power of mentoring and networking to help you on your career journey.

Many professionals are advised to seek mentors to guide them in their careers. But it's difficult to find an executive who's willing to commit that much time and energy to you -- and to ask him or her to do so. Expecting a formal company mentoring program to solve the problem is naive, since company-arranged marriages between mentors and protégés are dicey at best. With today's more diverse and savvy employee group, arranging a successful match is nearly impossible.

In a workplace filled with cross-functional task forces and teams, how can one mentor meet a protégé's every need? Traditional mentoring is an oak tree in the era of the willow -- it's breaking, not bending, as business changes.

Combining mentoring and networking -- or "mentornetworking" -- allows you to simultaneously lead others and develop yourself. The approach actually is more than just mentoring or networking. It's a process of giving and receiving by participating in relationships in which everyone is a learner and a teacher.

A Flexible Web

In companies where mentornetworking has taken root, you can be both mentor and protégé at the same time. You can build a powerful, yet flexible, web of contacts who can assist when you need help or information. Instead of one all-knowing mentor, you have a constellation.

You'll also be sharing your knowledge and abilities with others -- serving as a mentor to many. In other words, each "mentnetworker" receives and gives brain power to others, creating multiple short-term learning teams.

How to Mentornetwork

What's the best way to solve a problem, find an expert or locate a new job? Networking is one of the greatest career development tools ever invented. Indeed, many of the most successful U.S. executives (including the President) are simply superb networkers who have legions of friends they can call at the right moment.

To begin to mentornetwork, seek out and develop a core of networking contacts. Your job and daily activities are ideal starting points for building relationships. Identify existing vehicles for meeting others, such as company teams, projects and cross-functional groups. Your organization also may sponsor special interest groups and off-site activities.

Next, branch out to neighbors, clergy, church members, relatives, former teachers, members of professional and volunteer organizations and college alumni. You don't have to meet with everyone personally. Use e-mail, telephone calls, letters and company intranets to make contact.

Repeat this process on the mentoring side. Find existing avenues that can help you reach out to others. Determine if your company has a volunteer mentoring program that allows employees to share their expertise, even if only for a limited time.

While many companies have formal mentoring programs, informal mentoring is often more effective. This occurs naturally, when employees share their experience and insight about a company or problem. Be spontaneous. Let someone shadow you on the job or attend a meeting with you, or provide an employee with information you know is valuable for completing a task or project.

The advantage of mentornetworking is that you don't have to wait for an assigned mentor or protégé. Nor do you have to apply to participate or yearn to be chosen for a structured mentoring program at your company. You can initiate mentornetworking and benefit from its power.

"Mentoring is how to get work done," says Tom Alexander. "You don't have to be an official or designated mentor, or mentor on special corporate occasions. Sharing what you know and giving others a hand is just smart management. You accomplish your goals and help others accomplish theirs."

Six Mindsets

To take advantage of this process, recognize and adopt the six mindsets of an ace mentornetworker:

- Think non-hierarchical.

Networking and mentoring can cross all organizational levels. A senior executive can learn from a junior employee, and vice versa. In fact, mentornetworking is a golden opportunity for old-timers to update their skills and stay on top of changes in their field.

"Most people 'mentor' every day and don't even know it," says Karin Simpson, of Eastman Kodak Co. in Rochester, N.Y. "For example, our new hires are literally the best and the brightest. These individuals bring their state-of-the-art knowledge and technical expertise. They're necessary and important mentors to the rest of us."

- Think fluid.

The current workplace can be described as "permanent white water." As work situations and processes evolve, keep monitoring and adding to your network. Define the changes affecting your job and decide if your current web of contacts is adequate. Savvy mentornetworkers update their networks as their job and career needs change.

- Think multiple.

To meet all your needs and goals, you'll need to form many learning relationships. It's unrealistic to assume that one mentor or network can be all things at all times to you. Make a list of your information needs and use it as a basis for expanding your mentoring relationships.

- Think reciprocal.

Be prepared to give back to other members of your mentornetworking group. Consider their needs and how you can assist them. Besides helping specific

individuals, contribute to your profession, company and community. Find a few minutes each day for a "coachable moment" to offer advice, provide feedback or just listen.

- Think ongoing.

Mentor networking is a long-term strategy, not a short-term fix. Make a commitment to sharing and receiving information from contacts over the long haul. Great networks aren't built overnight. You'll need patience to make the process work.

"Mentoring is a self-perpetuating cycle," says Mr. Alexander. "Individuals who are good mentors beget others who are good mentors. It's a win-win for a company and the people."

- Think conscious.

This is a deliberate activity. Throughout your career, you must consciously strive to build beneficial relationships. For some people, this comes easily. Others have to work at it. Determine what you most need to learn and what you can contribute in return.

"Few people mentor naturally," says Ms. Simpson. "What mentoring really means is how you help someone navigate a company for themselves. People need clues and advice -- it's that simple."

Employees at some companies say that the reciprocity of mentor networking conflicts with competitive cultures that stress a "me-first" mindset to completing projects and advancing. To benefit from mentor networking, you must be willing to clash with such rules and share your own knowledge, expertise and skills until others grasp the concept's value.

Expand your personal view of mentoring. Define how you can assist others. Everyone has something to give, whether it's teaching, helping others gain visibility, serving as a sounding board, sharing information or introducing contacts. These are all legitimate mentoring roles.

You may need to exert more effort at first, since mentoring relationships, like all others, benefit from momentum. In this case, you'll build momentum by achieving small goals and successes.

Create a plan with mentoring "partners" that outlines the support they want from you, your role, how often you'll meet and your joint activities. Mentor partners may attend meetings together; discuss projects, life experiences and individual roles; compare views on corporate initiatives and create development plans.

View every introduction and contact as an opportunity to learn. Stuff your business or Rolodex file with names and addresses. Also include a note about how you met the person and what you spoke about. Look beyond the usual suspects. Neighbors, doctors, mechanics and clergy are potential network contacts.

"You never know where [a conversation] will lead," says Susan Gafferty, a software engineer in San Jose. "It's not just about what you can do for me. You [must be] absolutely prepared to return the favor and share what you know, too."

While working on a project with a tight deadline, Ms. Gafferty received assistance and expertise through a contact who had referred her to a company technical expert.

"I really believe my phone call [to the expert] wouldn't have been returned as quickly without an introduction," she says. "Network contacts help move your name to the top of the calls-to-return list."

Don't rule out mentor networking if you telecommute, travel or are out of the office for other reasons. Add networking to your daily calendar and strive to remain visible. Let others know what you're working on and offer to help via telephone and e-mail.

"Sometimes that's tough from a field location, but you've got to do it," says Melissa Faust, area sales director who manages three offices for a large concern.

You'll need to devote time and energy to being a good networker. Before you start, prioritize your objectives, list people you want to include and weigh your own commitment to making it work.

<https://blog.granted.com/>