

From the C-Suite to Line Staff: We All Need a Mentor

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I will learn.”

– Benjamin Franklin

“If you cannot see where you are going, ask someone who has been there before.”

- J Loren Norris

The term “mentor” comes from *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus asked his friend Mentor to help watch over his son while Odysseus went off to the Trojan War. Twenty years later, the goddess of wisdom Athena disguised herself as Mentor to provide that son crucial advice: to investigate what happened to his father. Mentoring today follows the same principle of passing on what you know to help someone grow, and it works both ways: finding someone who can teach you the ropes and then showing those ropes to someone else.

Formal corporate mentoring programs in the private sector have been widely utilized as a method for attracting, developing, and retaining employees, and for good reason. A recent survey by the American Society for Training and Development revealed that 75% of private sector executives considered mentoring as critical in helping them reach their current position. However, many not-for-profit health and human services organizations have historically struggled to provide mentoring opportunities for team members, often citing the lack of resources as a primary obstacle. If your organization doesn't have a formal mentoring program, some basic steps for beginning a pilot program are listed below. Many organizations who don't feel they have the internal resources are also utilizing one of the many external mentoring programs currently available to not-for-profit organizations, such as Luthercare, a faith-based multi-site aging services provider based in Litiz, PA, recently did with great success.



Mentoring within not-for-profit health and human services organizations today is more important than ever, when we're seeing an unprecedented amount of senior executives approaching retirement. When it comes to investing time and resources into employee mentoring, we think the age-old example about training holds true:

COO asks CEO: “What happens if we spend money training our people and then they leave?”

CEO: “What happens if we don't and they stay?”

Mentoring moves beyond formal “skills training” and creates a sense of connection with co-workers and the organization's mission. This is especially relevant when you consider that “I feel connected to the organization” ranked 2nd on the American Psychological Association's most recent workforce retention survey. What tied for 3rd place? “My co-workers” and “My job gives me the opportunity to make a difference.” It's really that simple. But if these statistics aren't enough to motivate your organization to get involved in a formal

way with an internal or external mentoring program, keep reading—we also provide some basic steps below for finding your own mentor.

When is it too late?

Never, according to our most recent survey of current CEOs. When it comes to work, everyone needs advice. Mentoring isn't just essential for individuals specifically targeted as "leadership track" employees. Mentoring staff at *all* levels should take place—from CEOs through line staff.

For example, we spoke at length recently with a retiring CEO with over 31+ years' service within the organization, and he shared how valuable his recent engagement with a mentor had been for him, even though he was nearing the end of his career at the time. He stated, "I still meet regularly with my mentor, and I will continue to do so as long as I serve this organization. Even though my departure date is less than six months away, his advice continues to be invaluable, and actually, right now more than ever. Navigating through this transition process has been more personally challenging than I realized, and he's helped prevent me from making a lot of missteps in the transition process." Other C-suite executives concur. Rev. Bill Snyder is a C-level executive with LutherCare. Although Bill has decades of C-level and senior leadership experience in faith-based not-for-profit organizations, he spoke emphatically about the benefits he and his fellow executives experienced from joining an external mentoring program a little over a year ago. "It has been a tremendous experience. I highly recommend being mentored, regardless of the stage of your career you're in. Receiving that insight from other professionals helped me see situations we

were working through in an entirely new light and from a multitude of perspectives."

When is it too early?

People often think of mentoring as for only those specifically targeting a "leadership path." But we need to start mentoring our team members beginning on their first day of work. Virtually every client organization we speak with in the health and human services field struggles with retention, especially with line staff. Consider the "Workforce Retention Survey" conducted by the APA and mentioned above. The time to begin connecting your staff with your mission and people in a meaningful way is the moment they walk in the door. So how do you move beyond the typical employee orientation process into an active mentoring program? Below are a few pointers to get you started.

How can our organization create a pilot mentoring program?

The first step is to form a task force. Depending on the size of your organization, involve between 4-8 people. Members of the task force should ideally represent a cross-section of the organization, including potential mentors and mentees. If you can involve your HR representative, that individual may be able to help tie department goals with the mentoring program's goals.

Primary Responsibilities of the Task Force

- Step One:* Determine the goals of the program.
- Step Two:* Choose a model. We consider one-on-one mentoring the most effective, but depending on your

organization's limitations, resource-based mentoring (where individual mentors and mentees are not specifically matched, but choose from an available list), or group mentoring, where a mentor works with 4-6 mentees at one time, can also work.

Step Three: Initiate sign-up of participants and select/match candidate.

Step Four: Evaluate results at the end of the pilot, make adjustment recommendations accordingly.

How can I find a mentor if my organization doesn't have a formal program?

Unless your company offers a formal mentorship program, or is willing to start one, it may seem like it will be difficult to find a mentor, and in fairness, the process will be a little different for everyone. Some people seem to stumble naturally into these opportunities while others aren't so lucky. If you're part of the latter group, here are a few suggestions:



#1: Often a mentor can be a co-worker, department manager, or other nonprofit leader you have already met within your organization. Asking to do something as simple as getting a coffee together can be a

very successful start to developing a mentor/mentee relationship.

#2: Another great way to engage a mentor is to collaborate on a project that is of interest to both of you. Choose something that supports your potential mentor's work and ask for some help putting it together. That way, you will both be invested in completing a goal together that can lead to a deeper relationship during or after the process.

#3: Look outside your organization. Your mentor doesn't have to come from directly within your organization, or even be specific to your industry. The mentoring program Rev. Snyder and Luthercare participated in grouped people together from a broad cross-section of industries: everything from aging services and healthcare to manufacturing and sales. He shared his amazement at how much insight specific to his situation he was able to glean from, for example, an auto engineer. He told us, "When you share a story with someone coming at it from a completely different angle, they can see insights that might be right in front of you, but you'd never see them in that light from the inside."

Determining your goals for seeking a mentor

Looking for a "Me in One Year" Mentor? Think about your short-term career goals. Where do you want to be one year from now? Look for a person who's currently there career-wise to be your "where I want to be in a year" mentor. Ideally, this person is someone who's been in your shoes and

can easily relate to your current experiences, but even someone in a different industry can share insights on how to navigate the “first year” struggles.

This type of mentor is great when you need advice on the little things, like the best way to approach a project. And, especially if working within your company, that person can give you specific direction on the tasks you should take on to get to the next level.

If you work for a large organization, you can usually find this kind of mentor just by socializing and getting to know people in your office. If you work for a smaller not-for-profit, take advantage of association events and after-hours networking opportunities. Many state-level LeadingAge organizations hold regular workshops and symposiums, and networking groups abound in most communities. People are there to meet up with other like-minded professionals, and if you simply ask, you’ll be surprised at the number of people who are happy to help out!

Looking for a Me in Five Years Mentor? While a one-year mentor is great for the day-to-day issues, it’s also good to have a “where I want to be in five years” mentor. This person should have a bit more experience under her or his belt in order to offer you advice on setting short-term goals for advancement within your organization or field over the long haul. This type of

individual will most likely be in a mid- to senior-level manager role within your organization or industry, but again, a more seasoned professional from a variety of industries will have insights to share—they don’t have to be “experience-specific” to be career-relevant.

Finally, strive to be both a mentee and a mentor

As we mentioned at the beginning, being involved in a mentoring program or relationship isn’t just about finding someone



to show you the ropes. It’s also about showing the ropes to someone else. Regardless of

where you are currently in your career path, there is someone out there that can benefit from your experience. While searching for a mentor, you should also be searching for potential mentees. Mentoring relationships should be formulated with the realization that conceptually, mentoring is a two-way street. What better gift can you give to others than to help them be better themselves? We think Benjamin Disraeli, who twice served as Prime Minister of Great Britain, probably said it best: “The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.”



About the Author

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