Helping Managers Understand Mentoring

Your L&D Guide to Supporting Managers as Mentors

This guide outlines how you and your learning and development team can support managers when they mentor others.

Please share it freely inside your organization.

Mentoring can help managers build strong skills, but it’s important to clarify that managing and mentoring are different.
Managers can make great mentors, but managing and mentoring are different. As an L&D professional, you should be able to communicate this difference, and then support managers who act as mentors.

If your organization has a mentoring program, you will have seen the advantages – such as increases in productivity and retention – that mentoring can deliver. Clearly, mentoring directly benefits the people who are mentored. A 2009 study found that people who had a mentor were 20 percent more likely to get a pay rise, and five times more likely to be promoted. The same study found that the mentors themselves were six times more likely to move into a more senior role.

Sure, organizations will only ask respected and emotionally intelligent people to act as mentors, and these people will be ideal candidates for promotion; however, managers are likely to respond well to this statistic.

Unfortunately, as we outline below, it’s not always appropriate for managers to mentor people who they manage directly, because the relationships differ so markedly.

It’s also important that your L&D team members are clear about the differences, so that they can assign the right people to mentoring roles.

In this guide, we explore the differences between management and mentoring, and we look at how your team can support managers who are also mentors. This will help everyone make the most of your mentoring program.

How Does Mentoring Differ From Managing?

Management is about getting work done through people, while mentoring is about helping people build their skills and navigate workplace issues successfully.

As such, a manager’s primary focus is to achieve her team’s business objectives. She may develop team members and provide some basic mentoring as part of this. But she’ll also evaluate their performance, and take disciplinary action if necessary.

By contrast, a mentor’s primary focus is to use his experience and knowledge to help his mentee (the person being mentored) develop his skills. There’s very little performance evaluation involved, and the relationship is more of a partnership.

Managers may not always have the relevant skills and experience to mentor their own people effectively. In many cases, others, who may or may not be managers themselves, can be better suited to mentor team members.

What About Conflicts of Interest?

When managers mentor people, conflicts of interest can arise. This is because managers may find it difficult to balance the needs and objectives of their teams against the interests of the people they’re mentoring.

You can avoid conflicts of interest by ensuring that managers don’t mentor their direct reports. However, in rare cases, a conflict of interest can still occur when managers mentor people from outside their teams, for instance, this might be a problem if the mentee is applying for a role in the mentor’s team. This is why it’s important that your L&D professionals can recognize and deal with these situations.

To avoid problems, you may also want to encourage people to use confidentiality or non-disclosure agreements if they are likely to discuss information that could be damaging if it is shared with others.

What can Managers Bring to Mentoring?

Most managers have the skills that effective mentors need. For example, they’re likely to be able to listen actively, ask questions, and give clear feedback. This means that you’ll probably have many managers who can contribute to your mentoring program.

However, mentoring is based on relationships, not on getting work done. So, mentors need to bring a different mindset to the work they do with their mentees.
To begin with, they need to create a “safe,” trust-based environment, where people can open up – research shows that mentees do best when they feel at ease.

Mentors then need to be able to listen empathically, and take the time to understand fully what a mentee is saying. In other words, they must “understand first, and evaluate later.”

Also, mentors need to understand the boundaries of the relationship. For example, mentees might present complex problems, and mentors need to know when it is more appropriate for the mentee’s manager to step in and give direct guidance.

**What is the Role of L&D?**

To begin with, you and your team members need to communicate where management and mentoring relationships are different, and why they need to be kept separate.

You should then provide some practical tips for those managers who are also mentors. As well as giving access to mentoring resources, think about other mentoring skills that managers might find useful. For instance, they could learn to use storytelling techniques to show empathy and build rapport, and to illustrate the different options that mentees could choose.

Also, provide guidance for mentees on how they can identify and select a mentor who is appropriate for them.

**Ongoing Support**

Mentoring relationships are dynamic: they change constantly, and you’ll need to support your mentors and mentees as they progress together.

Use our LinkedIn L&D Discussion Group to share your experiences, and to get expert advice on this from other people in your industry.

References
