

Mentoring

Description

Mentoring is a specific one-on-one approach through which people can learn a variety of personal and professional skills. A mentor is someone with years of experience and knowledge and the desire to offer guidance to someone learning the mentor's profession or going through a similar life experience. Most often, then, a mentor is a more experienced or older person who acts as a role model, compatriot, challenger, guide or cheerleader. For example, a mentor could be someone who is experienced with organic farming who is ready to offer assistance to and share knowledge with someone who is just starting. Similarly, a young single mother could pair up with a mentor who has had a lot of child rearing experience and who can be supportive and encouraging of a young mom. A mentor relationship is meant to be long term, and as in these examples, the process of establishing a productive farm or raising a child is also a long-term endeavour.

Some other examples of mentoring relationships are: Senior citizens "adopt a grandchild"; older students help younger students deal with peer pressure; business people help new entrepreneurs. Women, minorities and other marginalized groups may particularly benefit from a mentoring program when the support can be provided specific to their needs and flexible enough for their situations.

Most mentor programs have fairly structured matching processes with clear roles and expectations to ensure a positive, productive relationship. Each community will have its own type of mentoring program. However, it can most effectively be part of an on-going process of career planning, job search assistance, job placement and then mentoring within a field of employment.

Mentoring does not suit the needs of everyone who would benefit from employment or personal development services. It should be available as part of a comprehensive human resource plan (in other words linked with other kinds of support and training) but designed to meet the specific needs of a select target group or groups.

Benefits

A mentoring relationship is mutually beneficial. Mentors learn, grow and feel good about the guidance they are providing. Their partners benefit from learning skills and having the support of their role model.

Major challenges

In a systematic mentoring program, the relationships require monitoring and support: There has to be a process in place to check in and ensure that both parties are getting what they need from the mentoring partnership. In certain cases mentors may find that they need special training or some support themselves in order to do a better job at mentoring the person that they have been matched with.

Some practical steps

1. Conduct a needs assessment to look at the training needs of the mentors as well as the special needs of the individuals to be partnered, in order to establish any correlative training programs that may be necessary and beneficial to either or both parties.
2. Look at the organizations in your community that already have mentoring programs, e.g., Big Sisters or Big Brothers. Build on the resources that already exist in your community and beyond this look to other successful mentoring programs that you could adapt and replicate in your community.
3. Mentor orientation sessions must be provided for. Even if mentors will not need special training, there are conditions of the mentoring relationship that each mentor will need to be clear about. All will need some orientation to the limits and boundaries for both parties. There needs to be a mutual understanding of expectations and roles, as well as openness to the natural changes that will occur in a long-term relationship and the roles of each person.
4. Establish a matching process that recognizes that a successful match is not the degree of similarity between the mentor and the partner but the mentor's ability to understand and accept what the partner is experiencing.

Resource organizations & contacts

- Peer Resources offer a website (www.peer.ca) dedicated to mentoring. The website provides information about mentoring including on-line articles, a listing of existing mentoring organizations, and links to related websites. To contact Peer Resources by phone: 250-595-3505.
- A U.S.-based website (www.mentoring.org) provides mentor-related information, resources, and links as well as answers to frequently asked questions.

Publications

While there are many excellent articles and publications for this subject, a good selection can be accessed through the websites mentioned.