

FOUR KEYS to a Professional Mentoring Program

The difference between success and failure is in these keys.

BY REGINALD V. DUNCAN

Why do some mentoring programs show remarkable results while others fail? The problem is that many organizations jump into such programs without laying the proper framework. Be sure you don't skip any of these key steps to a successful mentoring program:

1. Gauge People's Interest.

First, survey your stakeholders to see how many people are interested in participating. Your survey should include the following types of questions:

- **What is your area** of interest?
- **How much time** are you willing to devote to the program?
- **What methods of contact** do you prefer?
- **Are you interested** in becoming a mentor, a mentee, or a mentoring coordinator?

Your survey results will show whether it makes sense to start a mentoring program. If there isn't enough interest, it is futile to develop a program. Also, be sure that the ratio of mentors to mentees is adequate. If there are too many mentees, mentors will feel overwhelmed, and mentees will feel their needs aren't being met. In such a case, the program has little chance of succeeding.

2. Define People's Roles.

Once you have tabulated your survey results and decided to go forth with the mentoring program, make sure everyone understands the following roles and the benefits each will receive:

THE MENTORING COORDINATOR

Mentoring coordinators are the organizational leaders who take responsibility for running the program. They monitor the

program and gauge its effectiveness—what works, what doesn't work, and what should be amended.

Your Duties as a Mentoring Coordinator:

- **Pair mentors and mentees**, matching their geographic area, level of experience, and areas of interest.
- **Track the relationship** between mentors and mentees.
- **Promote** the mentoring program.
- **Act as a contact person** for questions and concerns.
- **Create and facilitate** training sessions.
- **Develop and allocate** printed resources.
- **Keep mentors and mentees abreast** of functions and deadlines.
- **Record feedback** from program participants in order to make improvements to the program.

Benefits of Being a Mentoring Coordinator:

- **Acquire** important human-resource skills.
- **Gain** organizational development skills.
- **Obtain** experience in administrative duties that will foster professional growth.
- **Enhance** decision-making capabilities.

THE MENTOR

A mentor is an experienced professional who voluntarily acts as a friend, advisor, and coach to a less experienced person. A mentor should provide professional advice and not stray from the scope of interest.

Your Duties as a Mentor:

- **Initiate contact** with your mentee (especially at the beginning of the relationship).
- **Identify** your mentee's expectations of the relationship.
- **Share** your experience, knowledge, skills, and ideas with your mentee.
- **Set aside time** to meet with your mentee.

If there isn't enough interest, it is futile to develop a mentoring program.

- **Be available and willing** to answer questions and address concerns.
- **Put reasonable limits** on your time and the number of contacts.
- **Be an advisor**, providing direction and support to your mentee.

Your Skills as a Mentor:

- **You are a professional** with integrity.
- **You have knowledge** and experience you can use to develop another person.
- **You understand** what it means to be a newer professional and to want assistance.
- **You are trustworthy** and a loyal confidant.
- **You listen** and communicate (verbally and non-verbally) effectively with others.
- **You have pride** in your accomplishments and in your profession.
- **You recognize** and encourage potential in others.
- **You are able** to motivate people and build their confidence.
- **You support** and interact with your colleagues.
- **You model** successful behavior.
- **You are empathetic**, able to put yourself in the place of others.
- **You are patient** and tolerant.

Benefits of Being a Mentor:

- **You will establish** professional contacts.
- **You may gain** organizational or professional respect for recognizing and developing the skills of a newer professional.
- **You will find** satisfaction in helping another person grow and learn.
- **You will hone** your teaching and communication skills.
- **You will foster** the development of future leaders.
- **You will increase** your influence and power.

THE MENTEE

Mentees are students or new professionals who seek the counsel of more experienced professionals to help in their personal and professional development. A mentee can also share best practices with a mentor when the opportunity arises.

Your Duties as a Mentee:

- **Let your mentor know** your goals and expectations of the relationship.
- **Keep in regular contact** with your mentor, but don't abuse the resource.

- **Be open and honest** when sharing information.
- **Listen** to your mentor's advice, but remember that the decisions you make using that information are your responsibility.
- **Keep your mentor up to date** on your activities (but don't provide details that aren't relevant to your mentoring relationship and goals).

Your Skills as a Mentee:

- **You are** a good listener.
- **You're able** to make good use of information provided.
- **You express** ideas, concerns, feelings, frustrations, and needs effectively.
- **You have a realistic expectation** of your mentoring relationship.
- **You are capable** of self-examination.
- **You understand** that the mentoring relationship has no strings (there is no guarantee of employment or any other outcome).

Benefits of Being a Mentee:

- **You will receive** valuable guidance in your professional life.
- **You will benefit** from the knowledge of a more experienced professional.
- **You will gain** networking opportunities.
- **You'll have someone** to turn to with questions and concerns.

3. Customize Your Resources.

Printed resources are a crucial part of a mentoring program. Use your survey results to customize your resource tools to participants' needs. Here are some of the tools you should include:

- **Mentoring Application Form.** Use this form to gain information about mentors in order to pair them with mentees.
- **Mentee Registration Form.** Mentees should fill out this form for the pairing process.
- **Mentee Recruitment Letter.** The mentoring coordinator can use this letter to locate people interested in being mentored.
- **Mentor Recruitment Letter.** This letter can be used to locate people who are interested in sharing their knowledge with a mentee.
- **Information Sheet for Mentors and Mentees.** This fact sheet should provide a vision of what constitutes a mentor and a mentee. In addition to defining their roles, be sure to include information on the benefits each will receive, the skills needed, and the duties each will perform.

The more feedback you ask for, the better your results will be.

- **Letters of Regret.** You need a letter informing potential mentees that there are no mentors available to provide the type of development they need. You also need a letter explaining to potential mentors that there is no one interested in being a mentee at this time.
- **Pairing Letters.** These letters tell mentors and mentees the name of the person with whom they will be paired, along with relevant information about that person.
- **Participant Agreement.** All participants in the mentoring program should sign this agreement, spelling out their responsibilities.
- **Participant Information.** This sheet should give information about the background and interests of all parties involved in the mentoring program.
- **Tracking Form.** This document provides contact information on mentors and mentees. This data will be needed for feedback and correspondence.
- **Evaluation Forms.** All participants in the mentoring program should fill out evaluation forms. The results will help the coordinator gauge the success of the program and make adjustments if necessary.
- **Exit Interview Forms.** The coordinator should conduct exit interviews with mentees and mentors at the end of their mentoring experience, using these forms to record the results. Exit interviews give participants a good chance to provide feedback about their experience and give suggestions.

4. Review the Program.

Every six months, review the mentoring program. There are several ways to perform this review:

- **Send survey forms** to participants. Ask what is working, what isn't working, and what has room for improvement.
- **Conduct** focus groups.
- **Interview** participants by phone.
- **Develop case studies** by interviewing participants in person. Ask them to elaborate on their experiences and what they have learned.

These reviews are vital for several reasons. They help the coordinator make needed changes in the program. They may also provide useful information for other groups to start their own programs. Mentoring research is sadly lacking, and your reviews, especially your case studies, can form the basis for

articles you may get published, which can advance the whole field of mentoring. Some suggested topics are:

- **solutions on handling** difficult relationships during a mentoring process
- **suggestions for building** a new membership orientation program
- **pitfalls of designing** a mentoring program
- **problems of mentoring** a diverse group.

The more feedback you ask for, the better your research results will be. The more information you gather, the more you can streamline your program to fit your participants' need. Such an approach is the best guarantee of success. ■

Additional Resources

Berstell, Gerald & D. Nitterhouse, "Tell Me a Story: Using Case Studies to Discover Unmet Needs," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 5.

Brinckerhoff, Peter, "Using Surveys & Focus Groups to Gather Market Data," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.

Ellis, Susan, *Volunteer Management Videotape*.

Simon, Judy Sharken, "How to Conduct Focus Groups," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 5.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.



Reginald Duncan, MSM, is an operations analyst at Yellow Book USA in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. He may be reached at 1000 Church Street, Upland, Pennsylvania 19015, Reginald.Duncan@yellowbook.com.