

#05

Mentoring

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Mentoring

You need to establish a weekly, or fortnightly, team member mentoring session.

Mentoring is not just an important success factor for team building outcomes, but it is highly recommended as a regular management practice. At each mentoring session include an informal performance review, which could be as simple as saying “I think you’re doing a great job.”

The Mentoring session

Mentoring or one-on-one meetings help managers to understand what drives their employees and how they want to grow professionally. When held consistently, such meetings help build trust and allow teams to benefit from shared context, this boosts employee engagement as well as productivity.

The key to a good one-on-one meeting is the understanding that it is the employee’s meeting rather than the manager’s meeting. This is a free-form meeting for all the pressing issues, brilliant ideas and chronic frustrations that do not fit neatly into status reports, email and other less personal and intimate mechanisms. To be able to understand and identify the growth opportunities, you need to be an active listener where the employee does most of the talking and where you ask open questions. The meeting is about the employee to self-discover and self-reflect as well as a way for you to get to know your employee better. Your aim is to understand the employee’s strengths and the direction they hope to grow in so that you can enable them to experience personal and professional growth in the workplace.

The purpose of the mentoring sessions is twofold. Firstly, it assists with the rollout of the team building process and secondly it creates a working relationship that is positive and supportive that provides you with a management tool to develop your team members to their fullest potential. The scope of the sessions should change and evolve as the needs of the team member being mentored changes.

First session

As a kick-starter to your first session, ask the team member what their number one issue is. This helps break the ice, introduces your interest in work issues and the team members opinion. You can then move on to explaining why the sessions are being held, - to get to know each other better, to explore their professional development and work issues. Next try to exchange background information about yourself, briefly describe your

work background and how you aimed at getting your current position before you talk about anything else. Ask the team member to do the same, take the time to get to know each other. Try to understand the team members personal situation and out of work stresses and obligations. Use your own situation as an example. Being as frank and honest as you can helps build repour and encourages the team member to do the same. You are building a working relationship and you want to be able to easily, openly and honestly, discuss any subject, no matter how contentious or troublesome in the future.

Subsequent sessions

At subsequent sessions, the team member being mentored should be encouraged to share information about his or her career path aspirations and be given guidance, motivation, emotional support and assistance with how to achieve their goals. It is also recommended that you follow a standard agenda.

Agenda suggestions

1. Icebreaker: This is a basic but crucial step that experienced managers are usually adept at, opening such meetings with something not directly related to work.
2. Open and close the meeting with positive remarks. Perhaps when you start, you can acknowledge the team member for something they have done well. Before wrapping up the meeting, don't forget to reaffirm the value they bring.
3. Their top 3 work issues.
4. Team members strengths and weaknesses and professional development needs.
5. Training needs/progress.
6. Outline a development plan and keep track of it, set aside time and resources to ensure the team member is given the opportunity to reach their goals.
7. Follow-up: If they brought up a challenge last week and you advised them how to manage it, ask them how it went.
8. Team building progress. About team dynamics, how the team works together, what the working relationships are like.
9. Ask about projects, activities they are involved with.
10. Give any updates: Update your them about any new company, team or project-related news.
11. Include an informal performance review, such as saying "I think you're doing a great job."

Different working styles

Recognise that team members have individual differences in terms of needs and desires, aim to exploit their strengths and challenge them with new tasks to address weaknesses. Accept that there will be individual differences between team members, (e.g., some team members require more encouragement, some more autonomy, others firmer standards, and still others more task structure). Aim to understand their preferred working style and most importantly what it is they do best as this is an area you need to focus on in terms of achieving high engagement and job satisfaction, finally be prepared to address failings by talking about how to address them.

Make it a priority

Try to diary at least an hour with each team member per week. Depending on the team members maturity and experience, the sessions may be more spread apart. Use this time with team building and your own agenda in mind, namely that you are developing a team of professionals.

What you should not do

Cancel a session: Cancelling this interaction sends a wrong message that you do not take employee engagement and growth seriously. You must rebook the meeting if you find that you cannot attend the one scheduled earlier.

Talk a lot: This interaction is being held for the team members benefit. For that, they need to talk to you about work, the challenges they face and any other professional issues. Make sure you are actively listening and ask questions to better understand what they are trying to say.

Experts recommend that managers hold these meetings every week or at least every two weeks depending on the size of teams, their schedules and so on. Every quarter, however, it is a good idea to hold a longer, more in-depth meeting with your team members that focuses more on supporting their personal and professional development.

During your one-to-ones, you will learn valuable information about your team members that will help you to build a stronger and better team. Make sure you create a development plan (can be as simple as a list of actions and goals) for each team member.

Finally

Without a mutually understood agreement to speak freely, the relationship is unlikely to reach its full potential. Commit to honesty. Both parties should be prepared to offer frank feedback as appropriate, even if the feedback is critical. Listen and learn. Mentors, especially, need to remember that the relationship is not primarily about them. These sessions should reveal team members preferred working styles and as mentioned, professional aspirations. You are their role model, lead by example, remembering that your words and actions will create a lasting impression and will be copied.

Be careful of language; for example, never criticise anyone even when the situation warrants it. Instead, I strongly suggest that you tell them that you have an observation to make, albeit negative. The word 'criticism' or being perceived as being critical is negative; it turns people off; they stop listening and are unlikely to take on board what you have to say. If for example, you have made the same mistake yourself at some time or exhibited the same poor behaviour that you have 'observed' say so, its builds trust and reiterates that we all learn from our mistakes. Language is important. Always try to follow a negative observation with a positive one.

If you are running a team building process, use this time to explore how the team member is adjusting, any concerns they may have and any suggestions for improvement. Work to get them to take on increased ownership of the team building process, its outcomes and making new ways of working - new habits.

How to become a good communicator

People leadership means being an excellent communicator, ensuring that the right message reaches the right person in the right way at the right time. Communication is not a one-person show. Just doing the talking does not help; you need to concentrate on listening as well, which takes mental effort.

Before speaking, consider

- Rehearsing in your head the message you want to tell.
- Putting yourself in the other person's shoes, how will they interpret the message?
- Is the message clear, concise and unlikely to be misinterpreted?
- If it is misinterpreted, how will you back out?
- Practice active listening, that is, concentrate on what you are hearing. What is it the other person is trying to tell you?
- Often if someone has a difficult thing to say to you, they will disguise it, not be clear or concise, you need to be on the lookout for this.

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- If the message (such as an employee's termination) is sensitive or unpleasant, prepare a bulleted script for yourself to follow and stick to it.
- Be frank, direct, open and honest; the other person will pick this up and be reassured by it. It's a matter of not what you have to say, but rather how you say it.
- Check that your messages have been received by asking the team member to playback to you their understanding of what you have said.
- Look directly at the other person, that is, into their eyes. To do this and maintain a stare, look just above the bridge of their nose, between their eyes. This allows you to maintain a direct look for as long as you want. To the other person it appears as if you are looking directly into their eyes. This is an especially effective tactic for negotiations and when delivering bad news, it gives you the upper hand.

At your Mentoring sessions, you must impress on each team member how important it is to adopt, practice and make permanent the new team building methods. It is strongly recommended that you repeat this message every time.

- Recognise that team members have individual differences in terms of needs and desires.
- Accept individual differences (e.g., some team members receive more encouragement, some more autonomy, others firmer standards, and still others more task structure).

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