

## **Mentoring Programs:**

### **Is there a Difference in Formal vs. Informal?**

By Adele B. Lynn

Formal Mentoring Programs, in which a particular protégé or “mentee” is paired with a mentor to help him or her learn the ways of the business world, are sprouting in companies everywhere. In fact, in 1998 fifty-nine percent of companies either have or are considering implementing a formal mentoring program in the near future.

Sometimes the mentoring programs have very specific purposes or goals, such as transferring technical knowledge, advancing career goals, learning management savvy, or addressing performance deficiencies. At other times, the goals and objectives are less structured and are determined by the mentor and mentee as the mentoring unfolds.

Unlike formal mentoring programs, informal mentoring just happens. No program, no meetings to attend – just two people whose chemistry is compatible who get together to share ideas and learn. One takes the role of teacher or mentor, the other acts as student or protégé.

So what’s the difference between the two? Plenty. Here are the key differences in implementing formal mentoring programs – as well as some pitfalls to avoid.

- Formal mentoring implies an expectation. If that expectation isn’t clear for both the mentor and the mentee, it’s very easy at the end of the mentoring cycle to feel that the process was a waste of time.
- Formal mentoring can be perceived as a threat to or interference with the mentee’s boss. Steps must be taken to manage this important interaction with honor.
- Formal mentoring opens the doors to people who may not normally be mentored through informal channels. That’s great - but the mentees may need more encouragement and support throughout the process.
- Formal mentoring usually has some type of time limit or time expectation. Time can become a serious problem if mentor and mentee do not discipline themselves to meet regularly.
- Formal mentoring relationships are sometimes “arranged.” Those relationships can work out fine, or they can be mismatched and filled with concerns and problems. Great care must be taken to insure proper matching on mentor pairs.
- Unlike informal mentoring, there isn’t necessarily a trust bond that is present between mentor and mentee in a formal mentoring relationship. This takes time and skill to develop.
- Formal mentoring should include a training or orientation session for both the mentor and the mentee. It’s necessary to clarify roles and expectations and to give both mentor and mentee a roadmap for success.
- Formal mentoring programs need regular reminders and pick-me-ups to keep people focused and motivated. Newsletters, posters, and reminders are sometimes useful tools to energize the mentoring process.

With appropriate care, formal mentoring programs can be as successful as informal mentoring. In fact, formal mentoring can prove more fruitful if the organization has specific goals in mind for launching the mentoring programs. Most importantly, mentoring honors the human factor in business and holds sacred the magic that can occur when people touch the human spirit to bring out the best in one another.

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