

Human Resource Executive Online

SUBSCRIBE E-NEWSLETTERS AWARDS COLUMNS MULTIMEDIA CONFERENCES ABOUT US RESEARCH

BENEFITS EMPLOYMENT LAW HR LEADERSHIP HR TECHNOLOGY TALENT MANAGEMENT

SEARCH | [Advanced Search](#)



DOJ's Move to Protect Transgender Individuals



Becoming a 'Decoded Company'



Disrupting HR in 2015

Mentoring at the Top

HR can play a key role -- as "matchmaker" -- to help senior leaders advance their skills through mentoring opportunities.

By Carol Patton

Wednesday, December 10, 2014



Several years ago, senior managers at Bobrick Washroom Equipment Inc. were assigned high-level projects. While turning to each other to share their insights or experiences helped them through their assignments, they would have also appreciated the opportunity to bounce their ideas off the executives above them.

Last year, the company implemented a formal mentoring program for roughly 50 of its senior managers, says Elizabeth Bayee, employee training manager at Bobrick, a 500-employee manufacturer of commercial washroom accessories based in North Hollywood, Calif.

"We have a large chasm between senior managers and the next level of executives," she says. "We really wanted to be intentional about investing in our senior leadership ... and [we wanted to] help them understand that it isn't a failure for them to go seek out assistance from [others]."

Up to now, mentoring senior leaders has mostly been informal -- a CEO discusses a systems upgrade with an IT executive over lunch. But more organizations are now recognizing the value such conversations bring to the table -- the opportunity to learn from peers who may have followed a similar career path or who possess a diverse set of skills, experiences and perceptions.

In a growing number of organizations, HR leaders are working with top executives to set up infrastructures that will enable this kind of mentoring to happen. They're matchmaking -- helping to create and build sustaining relationships between senior leaders and others either inside or outside their organization, offering minimal training or guidance, and then stepping out of the way.

Mentees in Charge

Bayee at Bobrick was involved in mentoring programs at other employers, but on a small scale. She knew she needed outside help. So the company hired Rene Petrin, president at Mentoring Complete in Brighton, Mass.

Earlier this year, Bayee says, Bobrick's vice president of HR, Janice Blakely, took it upon herself to identify seven senior managers for the nine-month program, those who were on track for either promotions or additional executive responsibilities within the next two years. Then she contacted senior executives and told them about the upcoming mentoring opportunity while Bayee solicited their participation via email.

"We let the mentors self-select," Bayee says. "Nine came to the table."

Mentees and mentors completed an online questionnaire focusing on their skills, experiences, career paths or interests, competencies they wanted to develop and career goals. Individual profiles were created and participants were electronically matched. Bayee jokingly compares it to an online dating program. Both Bayee and Blakely reviewed the matches for potential problems, such as personality clashes. But none existed, so the pairs were left intact. Mentoring Complete's proprietary software uses an algorithm that matches people based on areas of professional development, personality preferences and preferred mentoring roles.

HR and Petrin then delivered separate, half-day training programs for the mentors and mentees, describing the program and expectations. While mentors were instructed to serve as sounding boards, mentees were told they were in charge, that it was their responsibility to create the agenda for mentor meetings, set them up and manage them.

Surprisingly, one mentor opted out. "He said he would be a better coach than a mentor and that he knew himself and would hijack the meetings," says Bayee.

Before cutting the others loose to pursue the relationships on their own, Bayee and Petrin conducted phone meetings with each pair that focused on mentor boundaries, communication styles and empowering the mentee to drive conversations.

"We laid the foundation and then left them alone," Bayee says, adding that each pair was strongly encouraged to meet monthly for one hour and required to check in each month online by answering several questions about the success of

Most Popular:

Viewed Shared

[Predictive Analytics Dominates My First HR Tech Conference](#)
[Comcast's Big Bet on the Future](#)
[Where in the World is Rudy Karsan?](#)
[HR Tech Changes Are Coming](#)
[The Pressure of Being 'Everyone's Ideal'](#)
[Finding Leaders Early](#)
[Managing the Message](#)



RECRUITMENT PROCESS OUTSOURCING

the relationship and types of topics being discussed.

Now that the program has ended, was it worth HR's effort?

rpo.adp.com | 800.466.4010

Bayee says 70 percent of mentees now have a better understanding of how the company operates. One manager even declined a promotion after discussing it with his mentor, recognizing that the job's responsibilities were not aligned with his career interests. But two months later, she says, he accepted another promotion that was a perfect fit.

The company launched a second program in November. This time around, Bayee says, she was better prepared. Apparently, after several sessions in the first program, mentees ran out of ideas to discuss with mentors, so now she offers them business cases from *Harvard Business Review* to stimulate ideas and conversation.

She says the key lesson she learned about HR's overall role is, as mentioned above, to "lay the foundation, then back off."

A similar approach to senior mentoring is taken at Washington State University. Theresa Elliot-Cheslek, associate vice president for HR services and chief human resource officer, and Dan Bernardo, provost and executive vice president, designed the school's executive onboarding program for 50 school executives, ranging from deans on up.

The purpose was to help new executives quickly get up to speed about the university's practices, policies, people, culture and state's legislative processes, says Elliot-Cheslek.

Likewise, executive positions at universities are typically marred by high turnover, adds Bernardo. He says the average duration of a business-college dean is less than four years due to fierce competition. So mentorships can serve as magnets for attracting and retaining quality executives.

"We've had [a mentoring program] in place for our faculty for some time," Bernardo says. "It just makes complete sense to extend it up and down the organizational chart because it's proven to be effective."

The program was launched last spring when the vice president of research was hired. Bernardo serves as his mentor upon request of the school's president. But usually, Bernardo says, the direct supervisor of an incoming executive consults with Elliot-Cheslek about appropriate mentors -- who are always peers, never a mentee's boss -- then asks them if they would like to serve in a mentorship role.

While HR at WSU may develop a brief training program for participants in the near future, its current involvement is minimal. It matches mentors with mentees, offers minimal guidelines on responsibilities and expectations, and then steps back.

But this program offers a twist. Within 90 days of being hired, all mentees also schedule approximately 20 face-to-face meetings with others at the school -- such as the budget-office director -- who "mentor" them about the department's function and how to access information, and introduce them to key staff.

"These one-on-one meetings are really key because [mentees] then have a relationship with somebody before trying to address a problem or significant administrative issue," says Bernardo.

Several months before the program was launched, the school hired four executives. One of them was Paul Pitre, dean of WSU's North Puget Sound at Everett. After hearing about this program, Pitre and the others asked if they could participate. HR found mentors for each executive, says Bayee.

Every month, Pitre meets with his mentor, Chancellor Mel Netzhammer. Although Pitre has mostly held academic positions at WSU over the past decade, he says the program has given him the opportunity to understand the school's culture from an administrative perspective.

"In order to understand the culture, you need different viewpoints and different opinions . . . or [you need to look at] your experiences [through] someone else's lens," says Pitre. "When you create a space for folks at the senior level to have open dialogue and conversation, you're enhancing the progress of your organization."

Trivial Things Matter

Before setting up an executive mentoring program, HR must clearly identify the program's goals. What outcomes are expected? Would leadership courses or assigning coaches be better options?

Some programs are doomed before they start because the business case or outcome is not clear, or the time commitment is too demanding, says Ravin Jesuthasan, global practice leader for talent management at Towers Watson in Chicago.

"Sometimes, [mentorships] are viewed as open-ended commitments with no end dates," he says. "Start in a very gentle way. If it's an initial one-year commitment, say, 'We'd like you to connect once a quarter.' ... If you've done your homework right, matched them up well and they see value from that relationship ... both [mentor and mentee may] want to get together more often."

Other times, Jesuthasan says, HR can underestimate the level of resistance among participants. The program may be perceived as the "flavor of the day," he says. It can take off with a bang and then fizzle because everyone loses interest. That's usually a sign of mismatched pairs.

All relationships must be self-sustaining. Both sides need to share personal and professional interests. Maybe they both enjoy playing golf or have children of similar ages. Although it may sound silly, Jesuthasan says, it's the trivial things that sometimes become the basis for the strongest and longest relationships.

HR needs to check in maybe once a year, ensuring that mentoring is still working and meeting everyone's needs. "But that's a light touch, not direct involvement," he says.

Designing the Experience

As the job of C-suite executives becomes more complex, mentoring opportunities appear to be growing, especially in Europe, says David Clutterbuck, a global consultant based in Maidenhead, U.K., who co-authored *Mentoring*

Newsletter Sign-Up:

Benefits

HR Technology

Talent Management

HR Leadership

Inside HR Tech

HRENow

Special Offers

Email Address

Submit

[Privacy Policy](#)

Executives and Directors.

After senior business leaders retire, he says, many don't want to stand in the long line of consultants or coach others, since coaching doesn't really tap into the value of their experience. Coaching tends to focus on performance while mentoring is more holistic and career- and relationship-oriented, Clutterbuck says. Other differences: Coaches tend to observe mentees and provide feedback while mentors share learning experiences and help mentees build networks and better understand the political environment.

Although some executives are reluctant to be mentored, "the reality is, the closer you get to the top, the more learning you need to be able to do," says Clutterbuck, who also designs products for Coaching and Mentoring International, a global network of trainer-consultants specializing in coaching and mentoring program design, implementation and training.

He says HR can help senior executives build mentor networks composed of internal or external individuals with different skills, such as marketing or finance. Some of the most powerful programs involve reverse mentoring, through which people in lower positions mentor executives. Such individuals can help executives better understand diversity, for example, or what it's like to work in their company as a minority.

"If the succession process is going to work, the [executives] at the top really [need] to have deep conversations with a range of people one or two levels below them so they're creating this talent that can take over leadership roles," says Clutterbuck.

Mentorships can take many forms. Executives in one country can mentor those in others. One of Clutterbuck's clients asked key suppliers to mentor executives who were being transferred to their region to help them adjust to cultural differences.

Many senior executives have already developed informal relationships, but may not be maximizing them. He says effective mentors enhance the quality of their thinking around important issues. HR can ask, "Who really stretches your thinking and the way you approach things?" Clutterbuck says, adding that executives will typically point to someone outside the organization since in-house staff may be "too afraid" to challenge them.

HR executives, he says, need to have the "courage" to have the conversation with their CEOs about serving as role models for personal learning.

"Experience isn't what makes a great mentor," says Clutterbuck. "It's the reflecting they do in their experience that gives them wisdom, and [helps them] help others develop wisdom on their own."

Read also:

Key Tips

Copyright 2014© LRP Publications

Topics	Events/Webinars	About
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits News & Opinion Healthcare Retirement Disability Employment Law Employment Law Stories Legal Clinic Most Powerful Employment Attorneys HR Technology News & Opinion HR Technology Conference Top HR Products HR Leadership News & Opinion People Career Center HR Executive of the Year HR's Elite Most Admired for HR Rising Stars Conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talent Management News & Opinion Performance Management Compensation Recruiting Relocation Training and Development Conferences Columns Benefits Column HR Leadership Column HR Technology Column Talent Management Column Inside HR Tech Column Newsletters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HRE Conferences Webinars Awards & Rankings HR Executive of the Year HR's Elite Most Admired for HR The Top 100 Top HR Products Rising Stars Most Powerful Employment Attorneys Multimedia Webinars Videos The Bill Kutik Radio Show
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> About Us Subscriptions HRE Conferences Webinars Research Center Legal Clinic White Papers/Case Studies