



Diversity Mentoring

LESSONS IN DIVERSITY MENTORING

Today's organisations must be able to capitalise on diversity – tapping into a multi-cultural workforce, managing the demands of an increasingly well-educated and experienced cadre of female managers and facilitating virtual teams and alliances in a global workplace.

By facilitating cross-group understanding and supporting disadvantaged or minority groups within an organisation, mentoring is emerging as a powerful method for encouraging organizational diversity.

However, mentoring within or between unique groups comes with unique problems. We outline below some of the key lessons that have been learned thus far in "diversity mentoring".

1. DEFINE THE PURPOSE CAREFULLY

Any mentoring program should be clear about its purpose, but this is particularly the case with "diversity mentoring" because it is so easy to generalize. A mentoring program that is simply to "support women in the organisation" is likely to lead to a large number of lunch meetings where everyone wonders what they are doing here.

2. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

There is a genuine risk that good intention leads to unintentional insult. We have seen a number of instances where mentoring

programs intended to support a specific group were perceived as devaluing that group. So for example a program designed to support a specific racial minority may lead the group to feel that they are considered "not good enough". It is important to understand the perspective of the group you are trying to support.

3. MAKE PROGRAMS "OPT IN"

For any mentoring program to be successful it is critical that both the mentors and the mentees want to be there. This is even more important for diversity programs, particularly cross group programs where you are asking people to listen and understand others with substantially different perspectives.

4. ENSURE QUALITY TRUMPS QUANTITY

If you are running a diversity program it is tempting to want to include everyone who fits the diversity objective. But the truth is that establishing a bad mentoring relationship is far worse than having no relationship at all – particularly when dealing with delicate diversity issues.

It is essential that programs are limited to the number of quality mentors available. A quality mentor will need to have strong communication and empathic skills and a track record in people development. (See our article on Selecting a Mentor for more on what makes a good mentor.)

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5. SAME GROUP VERSUS CROSS GROUP? – IT DEPENDS

There is much discussion about whether diversity programs work best if the mentor and mentee are from the same group or different groups. Each has its advantages. A same group relationship is likely to establish a strong rapport and empathy between the mentor and mentee. On the other hand, cross group relationships are able to foster a greater level of cross-cultural or gender understanding which can be advantageous to the organisation as a whole.

The decision goes back to our first lesson – know your purpose. If the purpose is to help disenfranchised employees to grow confident and comfortable within a role or an organisation then same group programs may be more successful. If the purpose is to foster communication and understanding within your organisation then cross group programs will work better.

6. INVEST IN TRAINING

There is little more frustrating to us than to watch organisations run mentoring programs without appropriate mentor/mentee training. It is critical to the success of any mentoring program that both sides of the relationship receive training. All training programs must be geared to help mentees understand their role in the process and to raise mentor's "coaching" competencies.

In diversity mentoring it is also critical that both sides of the relationship are trained to be aware of diversity issues, such as how stereotyping occurs and how different cultures or genders may approach the same issue differently.

7. ACKNOWLEDGE STEREOTYPING

Stereotyping is probably the biggest single barrier to success of diversity mentoring programs. In same group relationships stereotypes may be shared and go unquestioned – despite the fact that these stereotypes may be the biggest single barriers to success. In cross group relationships the stereotypes of one or both sides may lead to assumptions that unconsciously limit the potential of the relationship.

It is critical that stereotypes be discussed and acknowledged during training, and that mentors, in particular, are trained to be able to openly and honestly discuss the role of stereotype in the mentoring relationship and in the mentee's progress within the organisation.

8. BALANCE DISADVANTAGE WITH ADVANTAGE

Often diversity mentoring involves a relationship between a disadvantaged person and someone who is not. The most obvious example of this would be physically handicapped mentees working with the able bodied. This requires a tricky balancing act on the part of the mentor. On the one hand if the disadvantage is completely ignored then the mentee may feel patronized and there is a failure to recognise some of the limitations that may need to be overcome. On the other hand if the disadvantage is allowed to take centre stage this may limit the ability to set stretch goals.

An effective way for mentors to deal with this is to balance disadvantage with advantage. Work with the mentee to establish a realistic balance sheet of the advantages and disadvantages they have in the workplace. This recognizes that the disadvantage is a reality to be faced, but also puts it into a framework that allows for progress.

CONTACT US

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