Mentoring: New Approaches to a Time-Tested Career Development Strategy

When his company switched from a traditional mentoring program to “mentor circles,” Matias Heilala of Kaiser Associates International was skeptical. “To me, having a mentor meant having a one-on-one conversation with someone older and wiser. I felt that would be lost with the new mentor circles.” After attending several sessions, however, Mat is a convert. “Mentor circles give me access to more than one mentor. Since we meet as a group, I also get to hear the concerns and questions of my peers. Sometimes, I learn about things that I wouldn’t have thought to ask about otherwise.”

Mentor circles are just one example of how traditional mentoring is evolving to meet the needs of professionals across industries and sectors. Today, a professional may have the option to join a mentor circle, participate in flash mentoring, benefit from rotational mentoring or even learn from someone younger or at the peer level through reverse mentoring. What do these options offer?

Mentor Circles

Popular in corporations and small to medium-sized organizations where mentors are scarce, mentor circles provide an effective, high “bang-for-the-buck” way to deliver mentoring to junior professionals who face similar developmental and career challenges. Typically, a mentor circle has a ratio of 1:3 – one mentor to three mentees. Often, two mentors will join circles to create a larger learning circle of 2 mentors to 5-6 mentees. Mentor circles meet on a regular basis, often once each month for one to two hours. During the first session, the mentors facilitate a discussion about common questions and goals. Mentor circles may be run as question-and-answer sessions or with a pre-planned agenda, designed to address the topics that are of foremost concern to the mentees. In some organizations, mentees may follow up informally with the mentors on an as-needed basis. Mentor circles are an excellent format for ensuring that employees at the same career stage or level get high-quality mentoring and development through peer discussion and the insights of seasoned mentors.

Flash Mentoring

Flash mentoring takes a different approach with the dual goals of making mentoring readily available to those who need it, while at the same time reducing the level of commitment required by busy executives who want to mentor. The idea is to offer informal, one-time meetings between successful executives and mid-career workers. According to Scott Derrick, who has developed this concept through 13L, a group of mid-career federal employees who meet to explore leadership issues, “Flash mentoring allows senior managers to participate in giving advice and passing along valuable knowledge and experience without having to make a long-term commitment. For some of those managers, participating in a flash mentoring session can also show them that serving as a mentor doesn’t have to be burdensome.” A flash mentoring session usually takes an hour, which allows for enough sharing for participants to learn at least one thing that can help them professionally. The participants meet in a relaxed setting and focus on particular topics, such as work-life balance, managing workload, how to network effectively.
and career development strategies. Flash mentoring is initiated by the individual who seeks mentoring. The approach is presently used to connect federal executives with promising up-and-comers in government, but the concept could prove highly effective in business and non-profit settings as well.

**Rotational Mentoring**

Executive women who sign up for the Mentor/Protégé Program sponsored by WIT (Women in Technology) in the Washington metro area get to experience rotational mentoring. Unlike flash mentoring, which needs relatively little organizational structure to offer and administer, rotational mentoring programs draw upon a bank of committed mentors to counsel individuals who sign up to participate in the rotational program. The recruited mentors who are usually senior corporate executives voluntarily attend evening mentoring sessions whenever possible. The success of the program depends upon this steady base of experienced and committed mentors. Each mentor must participate in mentor training prior to being matched with a mentee.

Mentees sign up and pay a fee to participate in a finite number of mentoring sessions with the understanding that each session will be with a different mentor. The mentee finds out who will mentor her just prior to the evening session. Mentor matches are handled by a coordinator who ensures that there are sufficient mentors attending to provide one-on-one matches for each evening session. In the WIT program, mentees (called protégés by WIT) receive one hour of training on how to gain the most from the mentoring program. Then, in four subsequent monthly meetings, the mentees receive one hour of mentoring from a different mentor.

The WIT program offers more than mentoring, however. Mentors and mentees begin the evening with a half an hour of networking followed by a career-focused speaker, and then one hour of mentoring on site. Mentees “graduate” from the program after four mentoring sessions and are encouraged in turn to become mentors. Often, executives sign up first as protégés, then as mentors and then as protégés again, having learned the value of mentoring at all career stages.

The WIT Mentor/Protégé program is just one example of a rotational mentoring program. Other organizations assign mentors as part of career development programs and then mandate a new mentor assignment after 12-18 months. In general, rotational mentoring programs give mentees the benefit of multiple perspectives from seasoned executives who have received mentor training. While the conversations may be “one time only” like flash mentoring or for relatively brief time period, the structure of rotational mentoring ensure that good mentoring occurs.

**Reverse Mentoring**

Reverse mentoring turns the traditional concept of wise old sage advising a young, ambitious novice on its head. As the world of work changes due to technological advances and new ways of communicating and accomplishing objectives, reverse mentoring programs are springing up, formalizing the idea that people can learn from the next generation and from peers – not just from senior executives. According to Alan Webber, co-founder of Fast Company magazine, “It’s a situation where the ‘old fogies’ in an organization realize that by the time you’re in your forties and fifties, you’re not in touch with the future in the same way the young twenty-something’s are. They come with fresh eyes, open minds, and instant links to the technology of our future.” Organizations such as GE and the Forte Foundation have explored this approach. In a study conducted by Matt Starcevich of the Center for Coaching and Mentoring in

For additional mentoring information and resources, visit [www.asaecenter.org/mentor](http://www.asaecenter.org/mentor)
2001, “gaining technical expertise” and “to gain a younger perspective” were the top reasons cited for participating in reverse mentoring programs. Most reverse mentoring relationships were short-term, lasting one to five months. Typically, people met once weekly or monthly. Overall, the reverse mentoring relationships were not more or less effective than other kinds of mentoring. Like all mentoring relationships, they work best when there is a clear commitment of time, well-understood expectations, a focus for the conversation, and an emphasis on open-minded listening.

**Mentor Support from ASAE**

ASAE recognizes the value that mentoring can play in professional development. You can experience superb career guidance through a mentoring relationship, whatever the format may be. Whether you are meeting with a flash mentor, a reverse mentor, with a mentor circle or in a rotational arrangement, the hallmarks of a good mentoring session are the same: a willingness to listen and learn, an open mind, and a clear focus for the conversation. To support ASAE members in developing effective mentor relationships, we have posted a variety of documents and advice at [www.asaecenter.org/mentor](http://www.asaecenter.org/mentor).