

Mentoring Is Performance Improvement

by Margo Murray

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The principles and practices of modeling and mentoring have been key elements in the continuity of art, craft, and commerce from ancient times. In the arts and crafts guilds, a young person was apprenticed to a master who was considered to be excellent in the trade or profession (Murray, 1991). The master taught, coached, guided the practice, and gave feedback to the apprentice to enhance development of skills in the trade or art. To become a master, the apprentice's skills were judged from a work sample, such as a piece of silverware, a painting, or even a horseshoe. The word masterpiece originated from this sample of skillful work. Today we might call this the criterion test of mastery of the skill.

The skills required of the new masters in many businesses and professions today are as different from those of the apprentices of yore as the high-tech clean room is from the village blacksmith shop. Yet the process by which the skills are learned, one to one, are very much the same. Certainly mastering an art, craft, or profession increases one's marketability in diverse workplaces. This flexibility is essential in a world in which American workers will have an average of seven different jobs in their work lives.

In addition to the benefits to the individual, many organizations are now realizing the cost-effectiveness of men-

toring and coaching in the transfer of technical and professional skills as well as generic ones. With leaner, flatter organizations it becomes increasingly important to determine the core competencies required to stay competitive. In their studies of organizational renewal, McCarthy and Millen acknowledge that "...cutting people alone is inadequate..." for improving the bottom-line (McCarthy and Millen, 1994). During downsizing or right-sizing, there is a great risk of serious skill drain when experienced people are let go. This outflow can be stemmed by having a facilitated mentoring process that systematically transfers the requisite skills and experiences to the survivors who remain in the organization.

Myths about Mentoring

The myths about mentoring continue to be expounded in all types of publications. Some of these myths can readily be dispelled with data from actual experience. Some may be indicators of potential pitfalls that must be recognized and prevented from jeopardizing the success of a desired program. A closer look at the experiences of the writers, and their references, reveal that they are citing antiquated data and publications and narrow perceptions of what a mentoring process can be.

The following are some common myths from recent articles:

- Women must seek men as mentors

What do you consider the most important principle of practice in your area of mastery?

With any performance improvement intervention, and especially with mentoring processes, it is essential to carry out two of the basic analysis processes. First, a careful study of the environment will reveal support for and obstacles to mentoring. Second, analysis of the characteristics of the target populations will provide critical data for design of the process. This analysis will also yield actionable data for design of mentor and protege briefings, orientations, and preparation for an effective work relationship.

What was the most important influence on your professional growth toward mastery?

No doubt it was participating in the 1966 NSPI Conference in St. Louis. There I was to meet the leading researchers, thinkers, and practitioners in our profession. I learned from all, by observing them practice, and by learning to pass it on.

to tap into power in an organization.

- Mimicking a role model whose performance and behaviors are not always admirable and relevant limits ones growth.
- One-to-one mentoring relationships will not succeed because mentors will not give the time to interact with the proteges, or formalizing a mentoring relationship will take the magic out of it.

Traditionally a mentor was an older person with a long history of service who selected his or her own proteges and took them firmly under one wing to guide the lifetime career development of these lucky individuals. And they lived happily ever after. Or, when we read the dark side of these stories, we get the impression that the mentor used the proteges for work projects, took credit for the work, sometimes even abused the relationship and the mentoring partner, and refused to let go when the proteges had outgrown the relationship. Further, these mythical mentors complained that the neophytes attached themselves to the star's coattails and expected to be carried along to success in the wake of the one who makes waves in the organization. That description of a mentor is what we would define as a role model or sponsor (Murray, 1991).

The observer who strives to emulate a successful person, who may not be aware of the observer's regard, is not in a real mentoring relationship.

Similarly, the fortunate people who have sponsors recommending them for advantageous appointments or other benefits cannot be said to be in mentoring relationships.

Today's Reality

Today the mentor may very well be younger and have clocked less time in the organization. He or she may have been hired with exceptional professional or technical skills necessary to compete in new markets or to provide innovative services. Or, the mentoring relationship may be designed to transfer the skills of peer specialists to each other to enable both of them to upgrade a combination of competencies. In organizations that are outplac-ing thousands of employees, the mentoring process serves to transfer the skills and experience of those who are leaving via retirement. Some retirees have volunteered to function as mentors, maintaining contact with people in an organization where they had liked working, as well as contributing to its continued success. Some inexperienced and unskilled managers may view the involvement of mentors with their subordinates as an opportunity to abdicate their responsibility for developing their own people. Those who dread the tasks of performance planning and appraisal often heave a big sign of relief when they can check the box on the form that says, "Employee did not wish to discuss development plans."

It is unrealistic to think that any one person can develop competencies in the myriad of skills required to produce results in any organization. On the other hand, it is both realistic and practical for managers to view mentors as allies, collaborating on the development of employees as an investment in the human assets of the organization for the success of all. The manager and the mentor may have very different skill sets and experiences. Development planning can be a powerful, dynamic process with all participants focusing on the growth potential of the protege. Managers and mentors will bring their diverse skills, experiences, and work styles to this development planning process, and the synergy of the three produces far greater results than can be achieved in isolation or as adversaries. The message is: don't abdicate, collaborate.

Who Uses Mentoring Processes Effectively?

The types of organizations that have implemented a facilitated mentoring process include the following:

- aerospace,
- banking,
- community foundations,
- computer manufacture, sales, and service computer products, applications,
- financial/credit card,
- food and beverage,
- government/banking insurance,
- government power regulatory agencies,

Job Title

Development Objective

Capital Projects Accountant	Acquire trade relations experiences and purchasing skills
Commodity Manager	Improved people skills; exposure, and awareness to upper-management activities; courage
Copy Center Manager	Develop presentation skills, using multilingual capabilities
Electrical Design Engineer	Develop finance and business proposals
International Trade Specialist	Improve drive strength; time-management skills
Market Development Manager	Strengthen sales skills; improve balance between standing up for my rights and being more flexible
Personnel Relations Manager	Improve skills with cost side; compensation and benefits
Project Coordinator	Learn structure of the organization; gain job opportunities; develop skills with project management
Quality Program Manager	Develop task-oriented approach to total quality management
Technical Services Center Representative	Prioritize career goals, articulate and quantify "mini" steps to take to get to the long-term goal
Territory Representative	Develop skills with handling customer visits
Warehouse Supervisor	Learn company policies and procedures

Figure 1.

- health care product distribution,
- high technology,
- highway engineering, *
- imaging equipment and supply manufacturer
- information systems,
- law enforcement,
- manufacturing,
- petroleum exploration, refining,
- public accounting,
- publishing,
- research and development,
- technical information services,
- technology consulting,
- telecommunications,
- transportation, and
- universities.

Why Implement Mentoring When Times are Tough?

In today's lean (and sometimes mean!) organizations, no program will be supported and stay in place unless it

directly supports a goal or specific needs of the organization. Believe it or not, a prospective client recently stated, "Maybe what we need here is a big lawsuit to make us move ahead with some improvement in our employee skills development."

There are many more, and certainly better, reasons than costly litigation to make growth and development a high priority. You need only to look as far as the bottom-line—and every organization has one, including non-profits—to find a good reason to facilitate the pursuit of mastery performance. Here are some of the "whys" to implement facilitated mentoring processes during lean times:

- to make sure we are retaining the right people as we right-size,
- to attract and recruit people with the requisite skills and experience for tomorrow's demands,

- to make our experienced and skilled people feel more valued to increase the likelihood that we will survive,
- to improve results—monetary or other—with people who are more competent, confident, experienced, and motivated,
- to ensure representation of diverse groups at all levels of the organization,
- to enable our people to learn to work with others with different education, ages, cultures, physical abilities, and
- to improve communication across functional and divisional lines.

Figure 1 shows the types of skills being transferred today with facilitated mentoring processes in four well-known organizations. The job title of the protege is listed, along with the specific growth objectives stated in the development or mentoring action plan.

The Results Are In!

There are some significant and exciting outcomes of facilitated mentoring relationships. The impact on performance improvement in work environments is remarkable. When people become more competent, knowledgeable, and confident, they contribute more to the bottom-line results of the organization. Multi-skilled, flexible people add greater value to downsized leaner, flatter organizations. They can move across functions, work with different technologies, and are more open to learning new tasks. Further, they are more loyal to the organization, more likely to sustain their own motivation, and more likely to support necessary changes when they have a broad range of experiences and are empowered to make decisions about their own career choices and development strategies.

How do we know that mentoring has an impact on the bottom-line? In ISPI we often hear, "What you measure is what you get." Successful organizations are designing evaluation strategies to measure the impact of the mentoring

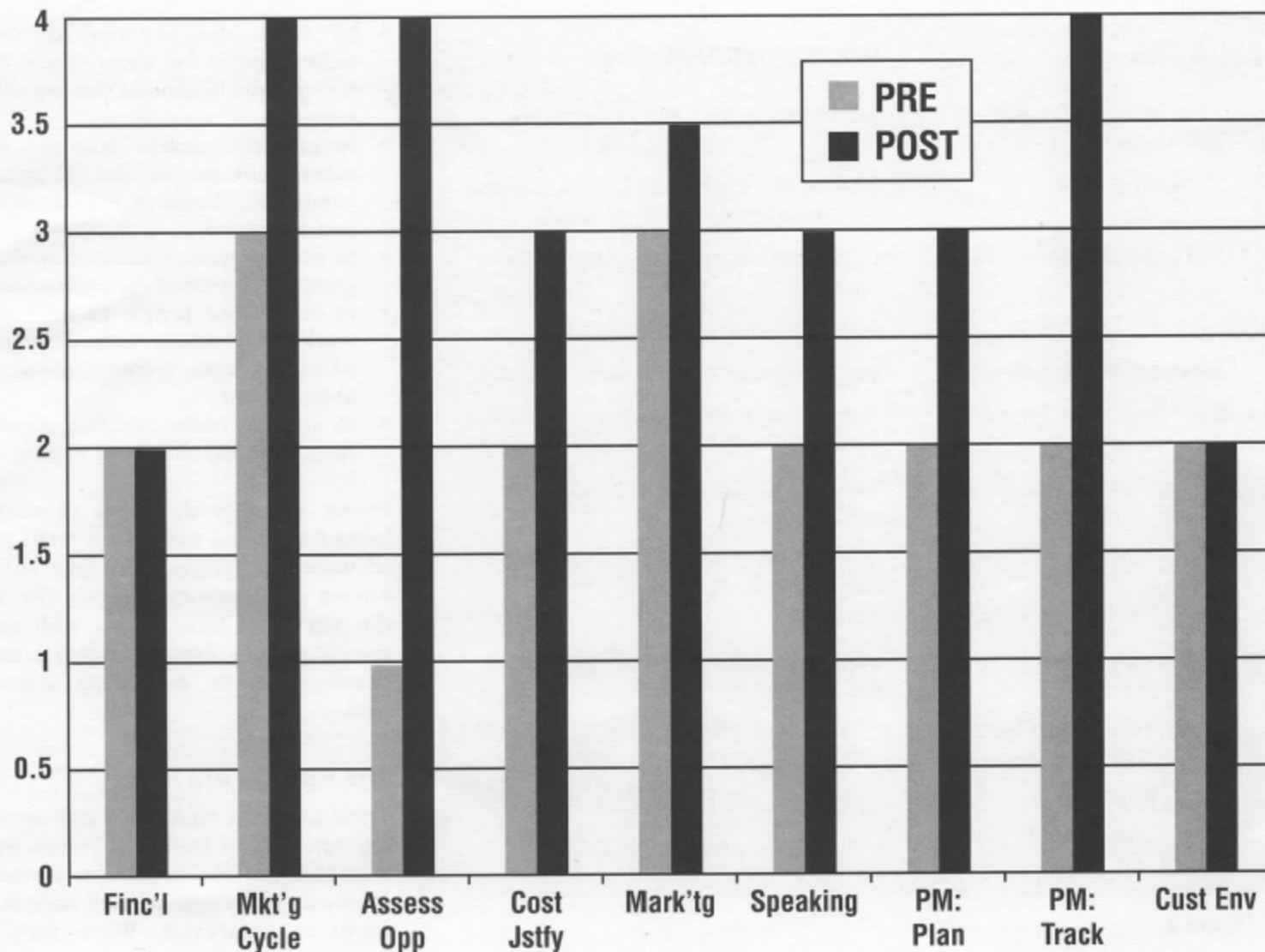


Figure 2. Protege Skills Assessment Job Specific Skills

participants' experiences on the organizations' results, as well as the skills and experience levels of the proteges and the mentors.

The following are some of the measured results attained in facilitated mentoring processes:

- increased awareness by managers of the caliber of employees, their core competencies, and the available talent pool;
- higher ratings on evaluations of supervisors by subordinates;
- increased number of cross-functional transfers;
- increased skills by an average of 61 percent on 11 job-essential skills;
- gains in nine of 11 generic career and life-effectiveness skills after 13 months;

- greater knowledge of the organization and other divisions within it; and
- increased retention of the best and brightest people.

Measured results taken from evaluations and protege development plans, plus anecdotal data gathered in focus groups, attest to the value added to the organizations as well as to both mentors and proteges. Of particular significance during times of rapid change is the frequent comment, "This process gave us an element of stability, and gave me an anchor in a time of chaos."

What Made it Work?

The key success factors that mentoring pairs cite run the gamut, as you might expect, from the range of jobs and

types of organizations that implement facilitated mentoring processes. Here are a few examples gleaned from recent evaluation focus groups and from written success stories of participants:

- "Honesty in our discussions; openness; feedback to each other."
- "We established what our expectations were in advance; we set objectives and met them."
- "Despite distance between our [work] sites, we kept in touch via telephone and e-mail, and got together when [we were] in the same area."
- "We made it a priority to put our meetings on the calendar, and to meet on a regular basis...expertise and thorough knowledge of the field..."

Results from facilitated mentoring processes are not accidental—they don't happen by chance or magic. The key to continuity in the process and to desired results is to link them to the mission, goals, and priority strategies of the organization. Separate programs are extremely vulnerable to economic downturns, budget cuts, and changes of affection. Only an integrated, facilitated process linked to current and future missions or business imperatives can be expected to stand the buffeting of the winds of change. These rapidly changing environments demand multi-skilled, flexible workers—and mastery levels of core competencies in all employees to improve performance, produce results, and sustain the organization itself. 🏠

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How to Become a "Master" in 10 Easy Steps

by Michael Greer

1. Identify some aspect of our field which fascinates you or stirs your passion. (You must really care about the topic to sustain your efforts.)
2. Research the topic by checking out what others have published, by attending presentations related to the topic, and by talking with people informally and in professional settings.
3. Conduct your own informal or formal research and document your findings.
4. Examine how the topic manifests itself in the workplace and identify "real world" constraints or implications.
5. Listen to your heart or gut feelings" about the topic and try to crystallize your unique vision or approach.
6. Organize your thoughts — both your findings and your recommendations.
7. Develop and share your thoughts by writing articles for P&I or other publication or by making presentations at local chapter meetings or national conferences.
8. Listen to feedback from your readers or your audience and rethink things if necessary.
9. Maintain your fascination or passion for the topic and share your enthusiasm.
10. Stick with the topic — Over the years repeat steps 2 through 9 and search for new developments or identify new insights. In particular, try to find the "big picture" issues or patterns which you have discerned by your involvement with the topic and share these.

The bottom line: You are unique. Your experiences and your interests may seem quite similar to those of your colleagues, but at some fundamental level they are unique to you. From this unique perspective your own voice can be developed. Fueled by true fascination or passion, you will be able to sustain the hard work it takes to investigate the topic and express your findings and recommendations. Better yet, you will be able to make the creative leaps that will contribute to the field and help the profession to evolve to its next level. It doesn't take enormous creativity or brilliance. It simply takes passion for the topic, the willingness to relentlessly and consistently focus on the topic to develop your own informed vision, and the desire to share your insights with others. To paraphrase Thomas Edison, [Becoming a Master] is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."