

# I Building an Effective Mentoring Program

Implementing training programs can be challenging in today's business environment. Budget considerations and increased workloads can make it difficult to find an option that matches both your financial and time constraints. There's one solution worth considering, however, that works

well under a variety of circumstances: mentoring.

In a typical mentoring program, new or junior employees are paired with experienced accountants who can serve as career advisors, providing guidance on everything from the subtleties of office protocol to getting ahead in the profession. Mentors can foster teamwork and improve staff motivation, and—by sharing their expertise—can also increase employee competency levels.

At the same time, mentors enhance their value to the organization. Serving as advisors allows them to build supervisory, leadership, and training abilities—skills that are valuable for any accountant. In addition, being asked to serve in this capacity shows the company respects their work, which can lead to higher job satisfaction and retention.

## Setting up a program

It's important to clearly define the objectives before beginning a mentoring program. For instance, if the primary goal is to improve productivity in your department,

you may want to concentrate on building participants' time- and project-management skills or proficiency with key software applications.

Next, you need to decide whether to have a formal or



informal program. A formal approach can be very effective because it's structured, with regular meetings and frequent monitoring. On the other hand, an informal program provides employees more flexibility—they decide how and when they meet—and there's less of a time commitment on the part of mentors. If your company has a human resources representative, consider seeking his or her advice on the

best method for your group.

## Making matches

When selecting mentors for your program, it's important to choose people who not only exhibit qualities you want others to emulate but also are excellent communicators and coaches. They must be able to provide support and guidance without micromanaging their protégés. Often, these attributes are less a function of years on the job and

more a matter of well-developed people skills.

Look for common ground when matching mentors with mentees. Shared experiences such as growing up in the same hometown or having similar hobbies can create an instant rapport and improve the chances for long-term success.

While the most common form of mentoring pairs participants one on one, you may also want to consider team mentoring. With this approach, mentees are assigned to a number of mentors who are experts in specific areas, such as the intricacies of cost accounting, auditing, finance, or e-commerce. They meet with mentors on a rotating basis, building their knowledge in a variety of specialties.

To achieve the goals of your program, you may even discover that the best mentors are outside the ac-

counting department. For instance, if you want a particular senior accountant to build her public speaking abilities, she may benefit from working with a marketing manager who gives presentations on a regular basis. Or you may hire a consultant with specialized knowledge or skills to mentor one or more employees.

### Keeping things on track

An initial orientation or kickoff meeting is essential to the success of any mentoring program. Even experienced managers can benefit from specific instruction on their roles as mentors. For instance, they may need clarification on the difference between supervising and advising or details on how much time they should budget for their participation. Remind mentors that their insights based on personal experience are more valuable than giving orders or solving every dilemma presented to them.

Likewise, mentees also need to understand how the relationship will work. For instance, will their mentors provide direction on how to conduct an audit or simply offer opportunities for shadowing them during these projects? How frequently will meetings take place? Putting some of the expectations in writing can help avoid confusion and misunderstandings down the road.

Privacy and trust are essential to a successful mentoring program, so confidentiality guidelines should be established up-front. Protégés are more likely to ask questions and seek assistance from their mentors if they know there won't be negative career implications. For instance, a junior accountant who is having trouble working for a difficult boss should be able to turn to his mentor for advice without fearing that the

supervisor will find out.

Even when a program is carefully developed and thoughtfully implemented, there may be times when mentoring relationships may not work out. Sometimes people just don't hit it off, or skills and needs aren't matched effectively. These problems can't be resolved quickly, so it may be best to assign a new mentor.

Whether you choose a formal or informal program, you'll want to monitor results. It's valuable to meet with participants periodically to check on progress toward key goals and to make adjustments if necessary. You'll ensure everything stays on track and that all parties are satisfied with the process.

Mentoring programs can be a great way to train your staff, build motivation, and increase employee retention. Take your time when establishing one at your company to ensure it addresses all of your needs. With commitment and flexibility, you'll help create a positive work environment that promotes learning and collaboration. ■

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