

## As Seen In Chief Learning Officer

### Reasons for Failed Mentor Programs Might be Rooted in Psychology

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To mentor is to serve as a trusted counselor or teacher. In an occupational setting, the key word in that definition is “trusted.” Unfortunately, mentoring programs often fail because this very basic ingredient is missing.

In fact, Jan Rose, Capital H Group principal, said addressing psychological factors such as trust in the design stage of a mentoring program can increase success rates, as well as impact.

“When it comes to designing a mentoring program, most firms get it right — it’s not that hard to design the basic elements of a program,” Rose said. “What’s more interesting is that so many mentoring programs fail. People lose interest. They don’t sustain relationships. People lose track of what the program is supposed to do, and it’s just not successful. There are obvious and not so obvious reasons for that. Often, people get too busy, but people get too busy for any initiative. Why do these fail in particular?”

Mentoring program failure might occur because the program’s goals are either fuzzy, or they’re all over the place, Rose said.

“The mentoring program is supposed to meet every need for everybody,” Rose explained. “The goals aren’t tightly quantified, established or agreed to by all parties. There isn’t a tight accountability for achieving those goals, and nobody can really articulate if that program is working or not.”

Psychological obstacles often can get in the way of a successful mentoring program. In some companies in which it’s very competitive, Rose said it’s not even rational for mentors to want to succeed in mentoring their chosen employees.

“We’re not talking about mentoring junior people — this particular issue is around mentoring more senior people,” Rose said. “There aren’t as many opportunities, it’s competitive and you really begin to observe, ‘Is the mentor really doing everything they can to mentor this employee? Is there heart in it, are they opening doors, are they showcasing these people they’re supposed to be mentoring? What’s in it for the mentor to do this? Is it in their interest to have somebody who is not that far from them looking well and competing with them?’ That’s a dark, psychological observation, but it’s a reality out there.”

Mentoring programs also might fail because of personal dynamics or generational issues.

“A lot of the people asked to mentor are baby boomers,” Rose explained. “The whole history and motivations of that generation — those people are often workaholics, they have a very strong work ethic, face time could be important, they believe in consensus, etc. These people are being asked to mentor Generation Xers, for example, and they’re coming from a very different place.”

Learning organizations don’t always ready the mentor and mentee to work together, or as Rose said, they don’t effectively equip the two parties to address their differences, which can lead to frustration.

An older, more experienced mentor working with someone younger or less experienced might wonder, “Why can’t this person just do what I ask him to?” Simultaneously, younger people might not understand why or how what they’re being told is important for the organization.

“It helps to get beyond the obvious stuff,” Rose said. “Assume that the program is designed well. Assume that you’re not missing some big thing in program design. Instead, put in your design the steps to address psychological factors. The first point is the mentor’s motivation. Truly, what’s in it for them to want to mentor? An organization that addresses that in a very proactive and systematic way will get much better results.”

Rose said to encourage a successful mentoring program, first identify the potential mentors. Then, do some diagnostics to determine their motivations for taking on the position.

Behavioral assessments, surveys and focus groups might be employed to get a firm reading of an organization’s culture, and this understanding might encourage mentors to want to do well.

“For example, one bank that we’ve been working with has a very collegial culture,” Rose said. “It’s not a particularly competitive place. The mentors don’t want recognition or financial gain — they want a chance to get together and network among themselves, so we built that into a program. It’s like psychology supervision, or a kind of community coaching. You design these things not around the mentee, which is what most organizations do — you put just as much attention or more on what the mentor gets so you can make sure they live up to their expectations.”