

## THE ART AND SCIENCE OF MENTORING

by Linda Russell-Callecod

Mentoring is not a new concept. The story of Mentor comes from Homer's *Odyssey*: When the king of Ithaca (Odysseus) went to fight in the Trojan War, he trusted and empowered Mentor to take care of his household and his son Telemachus. Mentor served as Telemachus's teacher and faithful guardian. In time the word *Mentor* became synonymous with an experienced and trusted advisor, friend, teacher, and wise person.

Simply, mentoring is a basic form of human development where one person devotes time, energy, and personal experience to assist in the ability and growth of another person. Notwithstanding, too few organizations have truly harnessed the benefits of the mentor-mentee relationship as an enhancement to their retention and people-development strategies.

Researchers have already confirmed that employee loyalty has shifted away from the organization to the relationship between employee and manager/supervisor. Those without a positive working relationship with their managers/supervisors are more likely to turn (leave the organization for a position with another company) versus churn (changing positions, jobs, and/or responsibilities, but staying within the same organization).

The same holds true as it relates to work socialization. If people feel they "fit-in," and have a positive social network at work, it directly affects the organization's ability to retain them, and the intellectual capital invested in them. I believe this is one reason the Gallup employee satisfaction survey asks if employees feel that they have a best friend at work.

Just recently, I had dinner at a popular restaurant in Bellevue, Washington and happened to sit at a table next to a group of young women who were talking about their job searches. One mentioned that she had two offers, both of which held similar expectations and functions, but one paying a larger hourly wage. Interestingly enough, she seemed to be leaning toward the company that paid the lower wage and wanted the opinion of her girlfriends. I could not hear all of the conversation (primarily because I was involved in a conversation of my own), but I did hear "It's not always about the money, you know..." several times. I also heard: "But I can grow at ('x' company), and I know people who work there." For late Gen X'ers and the Millennium Generation, it's *not* always about the money.

Retaining intellectual capital, preserving cultural values and institutional knowledge, growing future leaders, succession planning, enhancing the benefits of diversity, and attracting the most talented employees are all concerns of organizations who understand the value of their human resource. The one tool that assists in the success of each of these business initiatives is mentoring.

Mentoring is a science and an art, and to truly reap the benefits of this concept is to embrace and master both. The *science* of mentoring is in the formalization of a process that matches talent, sets appropriate expectations and goals, and tracks and evaluates success based on business competencies and values. The *art* of mentoring is in the development of relationships, the creativity and spontaneity in the transfer of knowledge, and the personal growth and self-awareness that happens in the heart of both the mentee and mentor.

While bosses may have acted as mentors a generation ago, supervisors today no longer necessarily see themselves as mentors, and do not “naturally” seek out those to mentor - especially if their company does not support a formal mentoring program. By the same token, nearly three-quarters of Fortune 500 organizations run a mentoring program.

United Utilities, a British-based company, began a mentoring program to support their succession planning efforts with its leaders and line managers. Under the program, senior managers and supervisors volunteered their time to teach managers, engineers, apprentices, and graduates about corporate culture, stakeholders, and other aspects of the business. With many of its workers becoming eligible for retirement, the company wanted to share those workers’ knowledge with the up-and-coming to tap resources throughout the firm – the *science*.

Unlike coaching, mentoring emphasizes guidance not direction; good mentors do not solve problems for the mentee, but become a sounding board and guide that helps point them in the right direction – the *art*.

Mentoring taps into continuous learning that is not an event, or even a string of discrete events. It is the synthesis of ongoing events, experiences, conversations, observations, studies, and thoughtful analyses. Akin to any other business strategy, it takes time, energy, personal commitment, and supportive resources to succeed.

Is it worth it? Having been on both sides of the mentor-mentee relationship, I say yes. In an article written by Lydell Bridgeford and published by ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) a 2006 study by Gartner Inc. confirms the many benefits of mentoring. Gartner spent five years studying 1,000 workers at Sun Microsystems and found employees involved in the firm’s mentoring program received significantly more salary-grade changes and promotions and exhibited higher retention rates than non-participating employees. For them I believe they would also say “It’s worth it!”