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Mentor Capital: Growing a Company's Most Precious Resource

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Introduction

Mentors can provide a number of valuable functions within any business group: role model, teacher, listener, coach, and all-around supporter. Mentoring can also assume many different forms, but fundamentally, a mentor's job is to enable others by sharing experience and knowledge. It is widely acknowledged that an organization's ability to mentor or coach others is a corporate asset, so logically, we would expect most companies to make teaching others an integral part of their culture. If they invest working capital (cash, for example) to maximize its worth and help drive their business, why wouldn't they do the same with their people?

Unfortunately, too often organizations either overlook or just plain ignore this critical aspect of corporate investment, which is a huge mistake. In fact, some promote the opposite of mentoring: By placing too much emphasis on looking good in front of the boss as well as constant demands on employees to prove themselves in order to preserve their jobs, they encourage people to hoard information and skills so others can't "steal" them. This is shortsighted; without "mentor capital," an organization has a dim future. The reasons for this are quite simple: Unless everyone is on the same page, executing against the same goals and owning responsibility for their actions, teams can quickly become fragmented and internally focused. This is a characteristic of a low-trust environment, in which people feel the need to protect and preserve their own interests above those of the team.

For software development organizations, mentor capital is especially crucial because they typically cannot take advantage of "economies of scale." Most software projects, in fact, suffer from a "diseconomy of scale," which means they can't achieve improvement (in performance, quality, schedule, etc.) simply by applying more resources to the problem. Therefore, they have a great need to leverage the improvements mentors can help bring about — in skill sets, communication and cohesion, data sharing, and focus — if they want to improve software development performance overall.

This article addresses the basic requirements for growing "mentor capital" and providing a sound foundation for an organization's future. It explores the fundamentals of mentoring, discusses the benefits, and suggests criteria for good mentors.

Building a Mentoring Environment

To understand what sort of environment is required for effective mentoring, think for a moment about the world of sports. Can you recall a single instance in which a coach refused to advise his team during a game? Refused to hold a practice? Neglected to give timely and honest feedback to his players (just think Woody Hayes of Ohio State!)? I certainly can't. In that world, coaches know that the team can't deliver what is expected of them unless the coach, as leader, helps them along by sharing knowledge, providing moral support, and paying attention to what motivates his players. Also, coaches know that they need to build leaders within the team — players in the trenches who can motivate their peers to achieve.

So what can we do to cultivate that kind of understanding and behavior in the business world, specifically within the world of software development?

There are several ways to implement a mentoring environment within your organization, and all must start at the top. If an organization's leaders don't value mentoring, then neither will the rest of the team members. Although we don't have an official mentoring program at IBM Rational, our field guidelines and core values demand knowledge sharing and leadership development on the part of every manager throughout the organization. An environment like ours is a prerequisite for a more "official" program, too. There will be no guarantee of involvement or success unless you first create a corporate culture that makes people feel that mentoring is the right thing to do. If your company already has core values that encourage mentoring, then a well-conceived program might strengthen good practices that are already in place and create a more effective mentoring environment.

To establish a mentoring program, start with the end in mind. Do you want to create an environment that grooms future managers, or one that improves skills, confidence, and ability within people's current positions? Also, keep in mind that personnel in sales, product development, and consulting have different needs, desires, skills, and career paths, so the program should be designed to fit specific career fields. Trying to impose a "one size fits all" mentoring program on an entire organization typically dilutes the initiative's effectiveness and value. And it's important to anticipate the needs of those who want to cross disciplines: engineers who want to be in sales, product managers who want to be field consultants, and so on. For those engineers, for example, it would make sense to assign a mentor who works with salespeople rather than match them with another engineer.

One approach I use to strengthen the mentoring activities in my organization is to include them as a measure of both individual and team performance. When I do my teams' annual performance review, I spend a good part of the time discussing what knowledge transfer, skills improvement, and general corporate citizenship activities took place during the review period. I find that if I do this consistently, then both leaders and team members begin to look at situations with an added dimension: How to help others be successful and reach their goals.

Mentoring Fundamentals

No matter what mentoring approach you decide to use, you'll want to keep a few fundamentals in mind. In general, good mentors do the following:

- **Facilitate thinking instead of giving the answer.** Good mentors make you think, form your own conclusion, and then execute. They see themselves as facilitators and drivers.
- **Encourage teams to take risks.** Mentors push teams to experiment with new approaches and to rely on their instincts and experience to move in new directions — as opposed to always doing things the same way, or relying too heavily on numbers to drive a decision.
- **Allow themselves to be vulnerable.** Leaders who don't put up a shield that protects them from making a mistake (or from simply revealing that they are human and don't know everything) make it easier for their teams to build trust up the chain of command.
- **Make team members feel responsible for everyone's success.** A goal of any mentoring program should be to make many people, and not just the manager, feel responsible for every team member's individual success as well as team success overall. This will give you a huge increase in the amount of support and the number of ideas at your disposal to improve performance. You'll also get better cohesion across the team.

Benefits of a Mentoring Environment

According to Noel Tichy, author of *The Leadership Engine*¹, all effective leaders strive to create mentoring environments within their organizations and teach others. There are many obvious reasons why this is advantageous: It increases an organization's capability, helps get the work done more efficiently, and so on. What about the reasons that aren't so intuitive? In truth, these provide just as much or more value. Let me offer the following list.

Promotes Creativity and Risk-Taking

In cultures in which trust is lacking, people go into "protective mode"; they grow risk averse and act only to ensure self-preservation. In contrast, when people feel they can trust others to give them honest and sincere feedback for the right reasons (i.e., to benefit the company as opposed to forwarding a selfish, personal agenda), they are more willing to open up, take risks, and forge ahead. In a software development organization in which communication and information sharing is critical for success, having an environment that breaks down territorial boundaries between and within teams can only improve performance and productivity. Development organizations that foster open communication through mentoring can enjoy the benefit of the whole team's collective brainpower and effort.

Smooths Out the Dips

Having a culture that promotes open communication and trust also helps teams have a better chance of weathering the tough times and accelerating through the good ones. Good mentoring can produce an organization consisting of people who are on the same page, capable of making the right decisions without being micromanaged, and able to execute both within a team and as individuals. This gives you a powerful foundation for getting through rough spots and persevering. Although ultimately it takes much more than trust and communication to achieve goals, having this foundation for the team is a must.

In addition, when challenging situations require everyone's effort, it's better to have a team of problem solvers rather than a collection of order takers. Mentoring can help ensure that team members know how to leverage their collective brainpower and work together to solve problems. They'll be far more likely to succeed than a team that is unable to think innovatively and unwilling to take chances.

Attracts the Right People

Winners like to be with winners. If you create an environment with a high level of trust and a high sense of mission and purpose, and if you give people the opportunity not only to reap financial rewards but also to grow as individuals, then you will attract people who appreciate and respond to those opportunities. Typically, people who

¹ Noel M. Tichy, *The Leadership Engine: How Winning Companies Build Leaders at Every Level*. HarperBusiness, 1997.

have a bad case of the "What have you done for me lately" syndrome — who are interested only in their own good and how much money they can make — are not attracted to mentoring environments that require a lot of give and take.

You'll also be able to attract good people because a trusting and mentoring environment provides an infrastructure that can help all team members succeed. If a prospective employee knows that your software organization takes on entry level personnel or people with skills that need to be developed, and that the entire team is vested in their success (and ultimately the team's success) and development, then he or she will feel totally confident about joining you. At the same time, new team members will know that they won't be able to "just get by," and that they must pull their own weight in helping to achieve the team's goals. Mentoring environments usually attract high performers to whom results and professional development are important.

People who believe in the corporate mission and like to work collaboratively are the people who help companies sustain performance through good times and bad. And that brings me to my next point.

Ensures Long-Term Survival

In *Good to Great*,² Jim Collins says that companies who have charismatic leaders do very well while that leader is running the show but begin to stumble after the leader goes. The reason? Charismatic leaders often force their people to do what the leader believes is right instead of what is actually right for the company. In other words, people focus on making the leader happy even if it means doing the wrong thing for the company. Also, Collins found, charismatic leaders make very poor mentors; they are wrapped up in their own world and have little interest in those around them.

Here's an interesting hypothetical question for all you managers out there: If your organization continues to execute very well while you are away on vacation, do you feel *sad* that they could do without you, or *proud* that they could do without you? Likewise, if they stumble when you go on vacation, do you stick out your chest and proclaim, "They can't do it without me!"?

If you fall into the camp of feeling sad when they succeed without you or comforted when they don't, then that's a sign of trouble. Chances are there is not enough mentoring going on within your organization, and people depend on you to make all the decisions. Ultimately, if you do not groom new leaders, then the failures will increase — and you will look bad, too.

Remember: Good managers teach their teams how to fish instead of just giving them the fish.

Who Should Mentor?

Mentors don't have to be managers. I remember reading a case study for a management course years ago that focused on discovering who the real "influencers" were in an office. Over a period of several months, the researchers tracked how many visits each person in the office received during the day from coworkers and plotted the results on the office seating plan blueprint. Without seeing this plot, you might assume that managers received the most visits over time, but this was not the case: Non-managers received far more visits than managers. The centers of power and influence in an organization do not necessarily reside within the management structure, this study found. When people come seeking advice and wisdom, it doesn't matter where you sit, how much money you make, or how fancy your title is. What matters most is a willingness to listen, give advice, provide feedback, and take a genuine interest in a coworker's situation.

These qualities are key, whether your organization has a formal mentoring program or not. If the environment encourages it, then more people will work on developing good mentoring skills.

Generally, effective mentors do the following:

Share a Teachable Point of View.

Not all great athletes make great coaches, and the same can be said about knowledgeable, experienced employees *vis à vis* mentoring. Of course, it's important for mentors to have a broad spectrum of experience and interests so they can advise on multiple areas and topics. But what really makes for an effective mentor is the ability to translate those experiences into a form that is useful to others. That means being able to truly understand the core issues involved in another person's work so you can shape your lessons to address those issues. It also requires the ability to analyze that person's strengths and weaknesses so you can support the former and help him or her overcome the latter. For

² Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*. HarperCollins, 2001.

software development organizations, it helps if the mentor has been involved in failed, as well as successful, projects in several capacities such as project manager, lead developer, or analyst, for example. It is also a benefit if the mentor has worked on various types of projects with different kinds of drivers and constraints. All of this variety leads to a well-rounded body of knowledge and experience one can draw from.

Provide Honest and Direct Feedback.

Some people avoid giving honest feedback because they want to avoid confrontation. To be of any help, however, a mentor must be able to tell people what they're doing wrong and provide constructive suggestions about how to correct it. Typically, this is a skill that people acquire over time, but some people never really become adept at it. If you plan to mentor, it helps to remember all the reasons why this feedback is important: to help someone see things in a different light and improve, and ultimately to contribute to the good of the organization.

Exercise Patience and Discretion.

The last thing anyone wants or needs when they're in a tough situation is to have someone broadcasting their issues throughout the organization. If there is going to be trust, then there must also be discretion. Mentors need to make sure they keep things to themselves and do not violate the trust of people they are advising. Being patient is also a key requirement when you take on the task of helping others. That includes allowing others to discover the answers instead of just blurting them out yourself. The discovery process is key to both learning and to developing the motivation to take corrective action.

Understand the Organization and How to Navigate.

Any situation involving a number of people includes dynamics that need to be understood and appreciated: Where does the power reside in the organization? What is driving the customer? Where are the icebergs and landmines? Why is a certain tool being chosen over another? Mentors should be able to play an important role in helping teams navigate through organizational issues, especially in software development, where lots of time, money, and resources are usually being consumed in order to deliver a system. It takes a wise and experienced person to recognize that people and organizations are not always driven by the obvious demands of quality, schedule, and so on; they might be trying to comply with secondary factors such as company culture, fear of change/failure, and risk mitigation.

Are You a Candidate for Mentoring?

Just as it takes a certain kind of person to mentor, not everyone is a prime candidate for *being* mentored. When you link up with a coach, you must be willing to open yourself to constructive feedback, face reality, and attack the hard stuff. On the plus side, this can lead to achieving your goals and making remarkable improvements.

Of course, the first step in this process is recognizing that you need help or guidance. A few years ago, I hired a personal coach to help me smooth out a few of my "rough" spots — to listen better, communicate more effectively, cultivate patience, and address a few other areas that needed attention. To do this, I had to take a hard look at myself and analyze where I most needed help. Then, I had to be willing to listen to feedback that was sometimes painful. "You're impatient"; "You talk too much"; that's what I heard from my coach at first. But realizing that this process was going to make me a better person kept me focused and determined to go through with it.

The process began with giving concrete examples of the issues, why I felt they were a problem, and what I wanted the end result to be. Then, I formed my own solutions. As I noted above, mentors and coaches are there to guide and assess instead of just giving you the answers. Coming up with a solution is part of the learning process and makes the whole exercise worthwhile. In the end, if you come up with the solutions, and those solutions work, then you will value and appreciate the lessons you learn that much more.

Of course, in the workplace, not all mentoring gets down to such a personal level, but listening to criticism of your work can be just as painful. I have found that to really get the most out of mentoring, you have to be willing to attack the toughest areas first. After that, the rest is much easier. Opening up and letting someone you trust dig, pry, and inject a dose of reality into your world is very liberating. If they're doing it for the right reasons, it can make a critical difference in your career.

Once you're certain that you're ready for a mentor, finding an appropriate person is not always easy or obvious. It helps if you know what you need from a mentoring program: Is it to develop technical skills or people skills? To get help with "reading" the organization or managing people? Knowing where you want to focus will help narrow your search and identify the type of mentor you are looking for.

Sound Investment, High Returns

Mentoring capital is just as important to an organization as its cash reserves. If you invest carefully in creating a strong mentoring environment, then the returns can be very high for mentors, for those they advise, and especially for the organization as a whole. As Jim Collins points out in *Good to Great*, leaders who are ambitious for their company rather than for themselves seek to develop *other* leaders who can help drive the company in the right direction. Through mentoring, they build leaders for generations to come, who can sustain the company's success over many years. In the context of a software development organization, passing on wisdom and best practices to develop leadership capability translates to continuous productivity, higher project success rates, and winning the confidence and support of the company's non-technical managers.

Do you feel your organization would improve with the help of a mentoring program? If you begin exploring the possibility, then you will soon find others who want to participate, and your organization can start realizing substantial benefits very quickly. A sound mentoring program can bring about improvements in capability, performance, communication, and team dynamics. It can also help those who mentor by teaching them how to lead more effectively and giving them a chance to make a positive contribution to the overall good of the organization.



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