

The merits of mentoring

Teaming up can yield competitive advantages

By Harvey Meyer

CEO GEOFFREY DESMOULIN often unleashes a secret weapon to address vexing questions for his small firm: his mentor, a business consultant who has confronted countless challenges during his own decades-long career. This mentor not only aids Desmoulin on specific business-development strategies for GTD Engineering, which examines human injuries for litigation support and research purposes, but, perhaps as important, offers a fresh, confidence-boosting perspective.

"A mentor can literally help make or break a business," contends Desmoulin, a Costco member, who instituted a mentoring program for his 13-employee Vancouver, British Columbia, firm in 2014.

As many small businesses have found out, mentors can yield competitive advantages, says Anita Ramachandran, director of MicroMentor (micromentor.org). A program of Portland, Oregon-based nonprofit Mercy Corps, MicroMentor facilitates more than 10,000 free online connections annually between small-business mentees and volunteer business mentors. A yearly MicroMentor survey consistently reveals that mentees' companies that embrace mentoring are demonstrably better off.

"There is definitely a significant correlation between businesses that receive mentoring and their survival rate, revenue growth and job creation," says Ramachandran.

Finding a match

Business mentoring has proved fruitful for eons, but it's now easier because of online services that enable local, national and even global matches. At MicroMentor, algorithms

The Costco Connection

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30 The Costco Connection JULY 2016

and other factors help connect mentees who complete business profiles with suitable mentors. Some mentees pursue two or more MicroMentor-facilitated mentors, effectively producing a virtual advisory board.

More research and best-practices information is available on the value of mentoring as attitudes about the mentor-mentee relationship evolve. Ramachandran, a Costco member, hopes to shatter notions that mentoring requires a years-long commitment between two parties. At MicroMentor, the average mentee communicates with a mentor for a total of about 12 hours, often seeking advice online, by phone or in person on specific business topics.

"It doesn't have to be this huge commitment," she says. "There are no rules or definitions as to what mentoring is. Mentoring can take many forms, and it can be accessible to anybody within a company."

Ramachandran says MicroMentor surveys indicate the most popular topics involve strategy, marketing, finance and business development. But personal issues—for instance, how much time you allot for family or nonbusiness matters—often naturally arise.

Measurable benefits

At Ervin & Smith, an Omaha, Nebraska, digital marketing agency and Costco business member, mentoring is firmly entrenched. It occurs informally and formally with all 35 employees, in programs such as Mentorship Meetings, Issues Management Mentoring, Lunch with a Leader and monthly one-on-ones with managers and a professional coach.

Heidi Mausbach, the firm's president and CEO, and GTD's Desmoulin witness multiple benefits with their mentoring programs. Among them:

Improved recruiting and retention. Mausbach launched mentoring 10 years ago, in part to boost retention, a major consideration in the

MENTORING AT WORK

BEFORE LAUNCHING A mentoring program for your small business, get educated about what mentoring entails and what you want to accomplish with it, advises David Shapiro, president and CEO of MENTOR (mentoring.org), a national nonprofit offering resources on mentoring.

Fortunately, many mentoring resources are available to help guide you (see "Resources" on page 31). As with other business issues, examine best practices, what to seek in mentors and expected roles for mentors and mentees. Think through whether you'd be more comfortable with in-house mentoring, connecting with outside parties or some combination of both.

It should be clear from the outset that mentoring is a priority and a serious enterprise. That means buy-in from top executives, says Shapiro. "The most effective mentoring programs have senior leadership walking the walk and doing mentoring as well," he says.

Shapiro suggests that a designated person communicate about company mentoring opportunities and monitor their effectiveness. Without proper oversight, a program could dissolve. He also says small firms should be realistic about expectations for mentoring.

"People sometimes make really small commitments and expect really great results," he says. As with most things, you get out of it what you put into it.—HM

high-turnover marketing industry. She says the company's mentoring programs significantly contribute to better recruiting and retention.

Employee engagement hike. Mentoring arrangements may spark appreciative workers to put extra time and effort into their jobs. Whether she's a mentor or mentee, Megan Belt, public relations director at Ervin &

Smith, says she's more engaged, happier and more productive.

"It's important for companies to encourage employees to use mentors for both professional development and personal growth," says Mausbach, adding that her firm's mentoring programs underscore its care for workers. She notes, "An employee's life outside of work can impact their engagement at work."

Opportunities for both professional and personal development are especially sought by millennials, who now make up the dominant workplace demographic group, says Ramachandran. "Many want to feel like their company is aligned with their personal goals and purpose," she says.

RESOURCES

THESE ORGANIZATIONS OFFER helpful programs, resources and information involving mentoring:

- MicroMentor (micromentor.org)
- SCORE (score.org)
- Small Business Development Centers (americassbdc.org)
- MENTOR (mentoring.org)

Cost savings and easy implementation.

For most small firms, no direct costs are involved with mentoring. At GTD, where employees participate in yearlong, confidential mentoring in suggested twice-monthly sessions, employees fashion their own connections. So it's easy to implement.

Increase in skills and improved attitude.

Many employees who communicate with a mentor or mentors make fewer mistakes and develop job-specific and management/leadership skills, not to mention an attitude pick-me-up. As a byproduct, the company's work product also improves, says Desmoulin.

"I don't take metrics off of our mentorship program, but my employees are constantly growing," he says. "The reason why GTD is a profitable company and our clients keep returning is because of our constant-improvement culture that strives for excellence."

Varied perspectives. Brainstorming with a seasoned mentor may produce unexpected takes on business challenges often gleaned from experience. Desmoulin says that's especially true if mentors are from outside the firm, which he recommends for GTD employees.

For all its benefits, however, small enterprises shouldn't consider mentoring a panacea for all of their ills. Mentoring is just one tool in the proverbial tool box.

Still, it could be a critical one. "I wish I had started mentoring for myself and my company earlier," Desmoulin says, "because there is no doubt about the personal and business benefits both I and my employees receive." C

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