National Center for Women & Information Technology
P R O M I S I N G   P R A C T I C E S

How Do You Mentor Technical Women at Work?

Mentoring has positive effects for both protégé (mentee) careers and organizations. Mentors also benefit. Protégés experience advancement and reduced work-family conflicts. Organizations experience improved productivity, recruiting, and employee socialization, acculturation, and retention. Mentors experience personal satisfaction, collegiality and networking, and career enhancement. Because of the advantages mentoring offers, it is one of the most common programs used for increasing women's participation in the IT workforce. Furthermore, more than half of Fortune Magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work for in America had mentoring programs.

Volunteers have often been in mentoring relationships in the past. This experience gives them a realistic view of the costs and benefits associated with mentoring. Employees who have never experienced mentoring before overestimate the time and energy that being a mentor would require.

In some cases, programs fail to produce the positive outcomes generally attributed to mentoring. A benign failure is when selection criteria favor employees who would have succeeded anyway without a formal mentor. More damaging are the failed mentoring relationships. In the same way that other human relationships can go wrong, mentoring relationships occasionally have bad results. Protégés can lose self-esteem or have their careers sabotaged; mentors can be betrayed or have to deal with overly dependent protégés. Organizations can suffer too; when mentoring relationships are negative, productivity can be reduced. For these reasons, it is important to carefully construct a mentoring program that avoids or minimizes potential problems.

Important ingredients for successful mentoring are: voluntary participation; mentors and protégés having input on the matching process; immediate supervisors not acting as mentors for their employees; easy termination of the relationship; mentors training that includes advice on how to handle problems in the relationship; communication of reasonable expectations about what mentoring can accomplish; proactive recruiting of mentors and realistic estimates of costs and benefits from the organization.

WHAT IS MENTORING?

Mentoring occurs when an experienced person serves as a trusted counselor, teacher, and advocate to an inexperienced protégé. Mentoring usually happens on a personal level in the context of a relationship that develops over time, in contrast to the more remote and one-dimensional role modeling. Mentoring may combine affective support, such as offering a sympathetic ear, with instruction in professional behavior and tasks. It includes actions such as sponsoring, coaching, acquiring resources, and providing exposure and protection to the protégé.

Formal mentoring programs usually have several components. They match mentors with protégés, offer events or activities to develop mentoring relationships, provide resources and instruction for achieving the desired outcomes, and evaluate results for participants and the organization. Effective mentoring programs are carefully planned, with attention to specifying, communicating, and measuring objectives, and developing sufficient resources to implement fully.

Mentoring programs most commonly fail due to unanticipated high costs of operations; usually time costs for program facilitation are severely under-estimated. Although mentoring is not always a positive experience, it usually enhances career commitment for men and women, including women in male-dominated fields such as IT. Benefits include more rapid career advancement and career satisfaction, as well as enhanced academic self-confidence of women in disciplines where the majority of faculty members are men. Both same-sex mentoring and mixed-sex mentoring are effective, although participants may find same-sex mentoring more comfortable.

RESOURCES

Please see NCWIT's Mentoring-in-a-Box: Technical Women at Work, http://www.ncwit.org/resources.res.box.industry.html

Multiple publications from: Belle Rose Ragins, School of Business Administration, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Terri A. Scandura, Department of Management, University of Miami.

Lois J. Zachary. (2005). *Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization's Guide*. Jossey-Bass.

Sun Engineering Enrichment and Development (SEED) Program (Case Study 1)
Mentoring Technical Women at Work

Career

The Sun Engineering Enrichment and Development (SEED) program pairs promising new hires and established employees with executives and senior Engineering staff volunteer mentors. The goal of the program is to make both the protégé and mentor more valuable to Sun and more satisfied with their careers.

The program lasts one year for recent hires and six months for established staff. During that time, protégés regularly meet one-on-one with their mentors, attend monthly group meetings for all SEED participants, and take part in other SEED events, activities, and informational meetings. Many mentor-protégé pairs are geographically distant so they communicate mostly by phone and email. Participants maintain their current job while participating in the program; it is not a rotation program. During the mentoring period, participants focus on technical mentoring or specific engineering skills. Protégés typically learn about "soft skills", ranging from how to improve teamwork skills to navigating the complex maze of office politics.

SEED's participants must all be in Engineering and be regular Sun Microsystems employees. Applicants with superior annual performance ratings are preferred, and manager support is required for participation in SEED. In addition to these four general selection criteria, the SEED program requires that mentor applicants hold a senior position and have been with Sun for more than two years. Protégé applicants are accepted based on their potential value to Sun, taking into account both technical excellence and leadership ability.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS
In the last five years, 385 protégés and more than 230 mentors participated. Women and non-US staff take advantage of the SEED program at a consistently higher rate than their representation in Sun Engineering overall. About 25% of all SEED participants are women. This percentage far exceeds the percentage of new hire or existing women engineers.

SEED's effectiveness has been measured through program satisfaction ratings and by comparing participants with non-participants. Although participants are pre-selected for likely success at Sun, annual reviews of participants' cumulative progress since 2001 showed the following patterns of career achievement among participants:

- About four times the number of SEED participants than the company average were promoted. This trend continues even in the year after participation.

- Participants earn about double the number of Sun's highest performance rating (Superior) compared with the company average.

- All participants and their managers provide a quarterly summary of their participation, level of satisfaction, suggestions, and professional development activities. SEED's reported satisfaction levels consistently run about 90%.

TEN GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

1. The SEED process works best where junior and senior staff can interact in an "open door" environment.

2. Appreciate that the benefit and effectiveness of a mentoring system grows over time. This program will not work well in an environment where only quick results have value.

3. SEED depends on a partnership between Engineering and Human Resources. The program would not function if this communication and trust were missing.

4. Use evaluation results to evolve, expand, and change the program.

5. Secure strong executive sponsorship for the program.

6. Document rules and processes; participant selection must be fair and be seen to be fair. Set forth the scope and expectations clearly and then meet them.

7. If the program wants to have very senior or executive mentors, it has to be designed and run with a focus on their convenience and learning. They need to trust the program or they will not participate.

8. Have a quick "no fault divorce" option if the mentor and protégé pair is not getting along.

9. Involve the protégés manager in the process and program.

10. Publicly honor and applaud both the protégés and mentors. They are sharing their time, experience, and wisdom and deserve both respect and thanks.