

People & Strategy

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Make Your Mentoring Program Memorable

By Wendy Axelrod

Now in its 11th year, the Philadelphia HRPS Mentoring Program is considered a growing asset to the HR community. But it was not always that way. It languished for years after its inception until we decided to tackle the symptoms of its underperformance one at a time. Now, we are firing on all cylinders, fueling our sustainability engine. If you want to either start your own program or rev up the one you have, you may as well capitalize on our investments.



Here are five standout features that have made the Philadelphia HRPS Mentoring Program a star.

Guard the Gate

Avoid “come one, come all.” Although the program is open to the larger HR community (well beyond our own member organizations), mentees cannot self-select in. Mentee enthusiasm, wants and desires are not enough to qualify a person for participation. Why? Several reasons: We are building a high-quality legacy program where mentees are spurred to become the strength of our future HR community. In the last three years, more than 90 percent of those mentees participating in a survey indicated making higher contributions to their workplace as a result of the mentoring. Many mentees also give much credit to the program for attaining significant promotions. The program’s caliber and reputation is enhanced, as successful mentee “graduates,” who have a proven commitment to our profession, provide the best PR for future potential mentees. And, later, these mentees attend our programs and some join our organization.

Another reason to guard the gate is to ensure that our seasoned mentors have a terrific experience — one that they grow from as well. In our early years, just to fill the seats, we opened the doors to any mentee who wanted to join. It turned out that some of our mentees weren’t even sure if they wanted a career in HR. That left mentors complaining about being underutilized. When one mentor was asked about rejoining for an upcoming year, she told us: “I don’t think so. I spent all that energy, and, for my mentee, it was more a curiosity than a real direction.” A key to the current success was establishing firm eligibility requirements and sticking with them. The highest qualified mentee applicants are primed to both enrich their workplace and our affiliate programs.

Give it Backbone

Friendly? Yes. Informal? No. Many people think because mentoring is a voluntary process, it should be on the participants’ own terms. Why set rules? With the guideposts we set, everyone knows what to expect. Consider that if the mentee and mentor come into the program with ideas on opposite ends of the spectrum, valuable time is used up getting aligned. Our program sets the baseline for two all-participants; live meetings (program

kickoff and midpoint rev-up meeting); mentee goal setting; mentoring pair meetings (twice monthly, preferably face-to-face); virtual gathering of mentees; and other targeted activities.

The program is goal-driven and rests on coaching the mentees on their real work challenges, as opposed to philosophical discussions or reading recommendations. This backbone feature is directly aligned with the mentees’ ability to strengthen their contributions at work, raising their confidence and performance. Not only do mentees experience the difference in skill level, so does their management, who express their gratitude to us. Of course, within the framework, there is lots of room for individualization, great probing explorations and personal preferences. Mentoring programs inherently provide legacy. However, that only happens if the program has vigor, value and continuity that come from structure and discipline.

Raise Intrigue and Eyebrows

Pique people’s interest in your program. Make your program a magnet. What attracts people to use their discretionary effort and resources? In our book, it is an organized program of high quality that is fun, achieves long-lasting results and provides high satisfaction for all involved. Our invitations to potential participants are often by personal

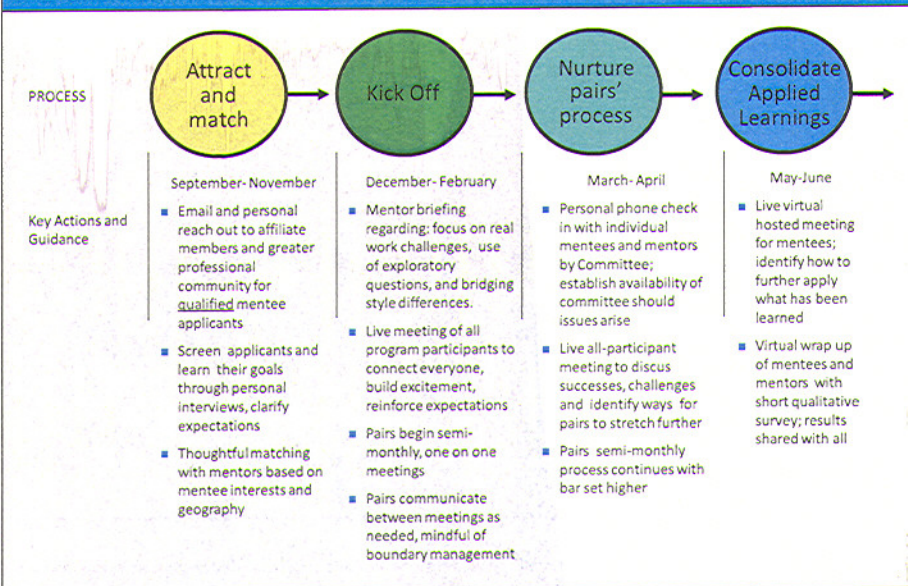
communication. Then, mentee and mentor applicants have a ready resource to respond to questions and raise concerns, which can knock down barriers. People won’t commit because they read about it or because it will be easy. They will get enthralled because of the personal stories they hear and how they can see themselves fitting into the picture and benefiting from it.

Stories such as the following have helped to bring others on board. One program graduate described how she successfully transitioned into a new position with the help of her mentor, taking risks she otherwise would not have taken. Another mentee told program applicants that her experience was invaluable in evaluating growth opportunities and leveraging new practices within her organization that quickly led to a promotion. And a third program graduate described the mentoring meetings as a great sounding board for testing out his planned approaches. In turn, his “well-matched” mentor helped him understand how he could bring increased value to his work projects. Right from the start, personal connections and excitement builds a stronger bond. That’s how sustainability begins; nurturing those relationships is how it lasts.

Cultivate Your Mentors

There can be a big gap between interest and skill. At the time of his screening interview, Paul, a past mentee applicant, said: “I’ve been

EXHIBIT 1: PHRPS MENTOR PROGRAM: A STEWARDSHIP CONTRIBUTION TO THE GREATER PHILADELPHIA HR COMMUNITY



Background About PHRPS and the Mentoring Program

Begun in 1979, The Philadelphia Human Resource Planning Society (PHRPS) was one of the first HRPS affiliates. Today, PHRPS is the premier organization for exchanging ideas and knowledge among the Greater Philadelphia Region's human resource leaders. The organization focuses on 1) professional enhancement for members; 2) increased effectiveness for the organizations that our members support; and 3) advancement of our profession. Offerings include quarterly programs and networking events, annual leadership forums with globally recognized presenters (open to the entire professional community), special interest groups (e.g., executive coaches) and area networking meetings. The involvement and give-back to the community is impressive through alliances with corporations, graduate university programs and not-for-profits. The mentoring program is a foundational component of the community connection.

Philadelphia has a vibrant HR community supported by a wide array of human resource associations and more than a half dozen universities offering advanced degrees in specialty areas of human resources. While the competition to attract top professionals to professional associations is great, PHRPS has had 250 to 350 members annually in the last two decades.

The PHRPS Mentoring Program was initiated in 2002 with the goal of sustaining HR leadership for our affiliate and for the region. Today, the PHRPS Mentor Program is intended to:

- accelerate the development of high potential HR employees at no fee for their organizations; and
- build our community's long-term HR leadership pipeline

In the early years of the program there were seven or eight mentoring pairs at the start and with fewer mentoring pairs by the program's end. After several years of revitalization of the program by our Mentoring Program Committee, in 2012 there were 17 mentoring pairs and others on the waiting list for an upcoming year. Current PHRPS President Adam Berman describes the positioning of the program: "We have an obligation to make the world better, to further our profession and the next generation. The mentoring program gets people to move beyond simply focusing on tasks and onto furthering their careers. On the practical side, this program is clearly a feeder for our organization, provides good public relations and attracts sponsors."

To learn more about PHRPS, check out the website at www.phrps.com.

through a few of these programs before, and though this one looks good, I want to be assured of the quality of my mentor. What training do they get?" The fact was, to that point, we had mostly assumed that our seasoned HR managers volunteers had what it took. After hearing from Paul, we raised the standards. We now interview each new potential mentor upon application. We provide a front-end interactive briefing for all the mentors as a group. We have also brought in experienced executive coaches to work with them. We address the how to's of boundary management, bridging style differences and

engaging in thought-provoking conversations. Today, we have mentors who appreciate the boost this program involvement gives to their coaching skills. These mentors are ready to take mentees out of their comfort zone, ask probing questions, shore up confidence and truly stretch their capabilities. The word has spread, and now new potential mentors ask about joining before we even announce the start of the annual application process. And, because mentors are required to be a member of our affiliate, some have joined our organization in order to be part of this great mentoring experience.

Mentoring programs inherently provide legacy. However, that only happens if the program has vigor, value and continuity that come from structure and discipline.

Use a Safety Net

Ensure each mentoring pair follows through to the end. A big challenge of many mentoring programs is that the mentoring pairs' process is largely invisible to the sponsoring organization. So, if problems arise, it is tough for the organization to intervene and provide support. In the early days of our program, we even had a "no fault" clause, allowing either party to readily opt out. Today, the committee anticipates issues and is ready to resolve those. All program participants know there will be an early check-in six weeks after the program begins. This short phone conversation with each individual (not pairs together) allows us to assess progress and uncover any issues. More importantly, this personal phone call establishes a connection. If problems should arise, they then contact that committee member. This process has worked several times, particularly when mentors are feeling underutilized by the mentee. We provide an expert coaching sounding board at a three-way meeting to get over the bumps. The process really works; in the last several years, 100 percent of our mentoring pairs completed the program. And the momentum of more graduates and more successes feeds greater connections to the affiliate going forward.

These five features provide a stark contrast between where we started, which was not consistently building sustainability, and where we are today. These success factors can complement progress in your program experiences, or perhaps act as a blueprint for a startup. Glimpse a few details on program structure from our recent timeline, showing the PHRPS Mentoring Program highlights from 2012. **P&S**

As managing partner of Talent Savvy Manager and co-author with Jeannie Coyle of "Make Talent Your Business: How Exceptional Managers Develop People While Getting Results," Wendy Axelrod, Ph.D., helps organizations boost the impact of their talent development, leadership development and executive coaching efforts. Axelrod is also past president of the Philadelphia HRPS and the creator and current chair (working with Mary Mavis and Terry Rothermel) of the PHRPS Mentoring Program for HR professionals. Axelrod can be reached at Wendy@TalentSavvyManager.com.