

How Effective Is Your Firm's Mentoring Program?

By Allan D. Koltin

Q: It seems every firm has a mentoring program of some type. Are there big variances in the effectiveness of these programs from firm to firm?

A: Sadly, more than 50 percent of CPA firms today have below-average or virtually nonexistent mentoring programs. That's not to say that they don't have one. My gut is that over 90 percent of CPA firms have them. But, candidly, it is almost viewed as a necessary evil (like performance reviews) that typically receives minimal resources and support to make it a meaningful program.

Q: How do firms go about selecting mentors?

A: It ranges from something that all partners are required to do to actually allowing the mentees (*i.e.*, those being coached) to select their mentor. I'm not a big fan of either of those methods and believe that not all partners should be mentors just because they are partners. Rather, we should focus on the high-performing partners (and managers) that have the passion to help others and, more importantly, will make the career development of others a high priority. Too many mentors today simply view it as a task to get off of their "to do" list and use the breakfast or lunch meeting to talk about surface issues and rarely connect with the individual. At some point, the mentor program loses steam and eventually rolls off the tracks. I can't begin to tell you how many times I have heard this scenario at many firms.

Q: Should the mentees be allowed to select their own mentor?

A: This sounds good and I think mentees should at least be able to put a recommendation in for their first, second, and third choice as it relates to a mentor. At most firms, however, we are dealing with a limited talent pool of high-performing mentors and often these high-performing mentors have limited time available to coach others. Bottom line, I would recommend that the highest-performing mentors work hand-in-hand with firm leadership to assign themselves to the staff and managers who are viewed to have the highest growth potential in the firm. This may not make everyone happy, but the firm needs to make sure its most talented staff and managers line up with the highest performing partners and mentors.

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Q: How do you go about putting teeth into the mentor program so that partners don't just show up for the meeting and essentially wing it?

A: There's an old management precept that says if you don't measure it you can't manage it, and if you can't manage it, you can't improve upon it. I would highly recommend that evaluation forms be filled out by both the mentor and mentee after the session has been completed and that those forms are tabulated by some third party (*e.g.*, HR). As the old saying goes, the cream rises to the top. I think you will find when you are measuring things over a period of time that the mentors who have the most skill and passion for doing the job will often score the highest.

Q: What type of things would you ask on the evaluation form?

A: As it relates to the counseling session, I would want to know that the session was private, uninterrupted, that the mentor had reviewed the mentee's self-evalu-

ation before the meeting and came to the meeting prepared to discuss these issues with the mentee. I would also want to measure the mentor's ability to listen with interest and ask questions to clarify and find out more information, if necessary. The mentor should also be measured in terms of his or her ability to set annual and quarterly goals with the mentee so that the mentee has a clear understanding of the expected performance standards.

Some of the questions I would also put on the evaluation form would include making sure that the mentor checked in with the mentee between the quarterly face-to-face sessions and was effective in holding the mentee accountable for achieving his or her goals. It's nice to socialize and talk about nonbusiness things, but at the end of the day both the mentor and mentee should have a "big 3" list of goals that the mentee wants to achieve during the upcoming year and a game plan for achieving those goals.

Q: What are things that the mentor can do to prepare for the initial session with the mentee (as well as future sessions)?

A: It is critical that the mentor talk to others in the firm to get feedback on performance-related items of the mentee. These typically come in the form of positive and/or negative comments, but most importantly represent honest feedback as viewed by others in the firm in terms of how well the mentee is doing. I also believe that the mentor should come to the meeting with an understanding of the mentee's strengths and areas for improvement and a game plan for improving any deficiencies in performance.

Q: What, if anything, can the mentee do in terms of preparing for his or her initial coaching session?

A: I think the mentee should attempt to put together what he or she wants his or her job description to look like three years from today. The mentee should then focus on what new knowledge and skills he or she will need to learn or improve upon to achieve the three-year goal. There should also be some discussion, if appropriate, about the mentee's desire to focus on a particular industry and/or service line specialty and, if so, some discussion on what it would take to grow professionally in these areas.

There definitely should be a focus on the growth and improvement of the mentee's technical skills, but the deeper question really has to do with what are the strengths and best growth opportunities for the mentee within the firm.

Q: Should the counseling session focus mostly on technical skills, given that this is such a big development part of a staff person becoming a manager (and ultimately a manager becoming a partner)?

A: There definitely should be a focus on the growth and improvement of the mentee's technical skills, but the deeper question really has to do with what are the strengths and best growth opportunities for the mentee within the firm. For example, if the mentee shows potential skill or promise in the area of business development, one might be inclined to put less emphasis on the

technical skills and more emphasis on training in the areas of sales and networking. When it comes to mentoring, there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. Just as we coach partners on their highest and best use of time, staff and managers should be viewed in the same light.

Q: You talked about preparation for the initial counseling session. Do most firms have in essence a packet that both sides would fill out in preparation for each session?

A: They absolutely do! Most firms will have a formalized counseling packet that will discuss goals for the following areas:

- billable hours/dollars;
- quality of work;
- realization;
- practice development;
- WIP and AR management;
- professional development;
- management and development of others;
- client service; and
- engagement management and administration.

They will also have in the packet an overall self-rating, such as:

- superior;
- above average;
- satisfactory; or
- needs improvement (include an explanation of the low rating).

The beauty of both sides preparing this packet in advance and exchanging it with each other prior to the session is that it gives both a vantage point on what the other side is thinking and allows the meeting to be that much more productive. The quarterly rating system comparative is a great way for there to be “no surprises” at year end on how the mentee performed.

Q: Is there an example you can give of a firm or mentee that illustrates the value of a successful mentoring program?

A: I recently had a supervisor at a firm tell me that an employee was solicited by two larger firms that offered a compensation increase and signing bonus as an inducement to take the new position. This employee said that one of the greatest benefits of the current firm was the mentoring program and the direct impact that the mentor had had on this individual’s professional and career growth. While the dollars were enticing, the person worried that this type of connection would not be found at the new firm and ultimately chose to stay with the current firm.

Q: If you had to recommend one thing besides formalizing the mentor program that firms could do to better equip partners to be better leaders, coaches, and mentors, what it be?

A: There are two things that come to mind immediately. One would be enrollment in a leadership development program. There are a couple of exceptional ones in the marketplace. The other would be the formalization of an upward evaluation program, whereby the partners and managers are evaluated annually by the staff. Most high-performing firms have this built into their system and actually use the results from these surveys (as well as corresponding improvements in partner performance) as a factor in partner compensation. Safe to say, these firms walk the talk and treat leadership development as important, if not more important, than any other initiative within the firm.

Editor’s Note: If firms would like to receive a sample mentor/counseling packet or upward evaluation form from Allan, please email him at akoltin@koltin.com.

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