

Good for the soul



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Mentoring is about letting people explore options, yet Microsoft has found it helps employees find fulfilment – and stay put

Mentoring aims to balance creativity and commerce, mission and mortgage, soul work and salary work, according to Mike Pegg, a mentoring consultant. Pegg, who has 35 years of mentoring experience, believes that the contract that you make with yourself in your twenties is particularly influential. You decide whether you are going to “take control or be a victim”, as he phrases it.

A psychologist by trade and a family therapist in a previous incarnation, Pegg says that much depends on the models you were exposed to as a child. It helps to have a family background where both parents do work they enjoy. “If the expose you to different experiences, foods, people and languages, you will see diverse pathways through the work-life jungle,” he says.

He also believes we need school role models of people doing what they love. We have a new generation of “achievers with a heart”, he says, mostly between the ages of 24 and 36. They wanted to achieve from an early age but expect to “feed their heart” as well as their pay packet, finding success and fulfilment. But he says this attitude is not confined to “generation “. It’s about attitude, not age.” He is convinced that if you show people where there is a way, they will find the will. “Companies must show individuals how to obtain a win-win situation,” he says.

Mentoring works as a retention tool. This may seem surprising, given that it’s about helping people spot multiple options, but in Pegg’s experience most people stay, post-mentoring, and create a job role that benefits them and the business. A new psychological contract is emerging, he claims, in which the employer’s role is to “show the picture of success” and the individual’s role is to decide how they want to contribute. He calls those in leadership roles “talismen or taliswomen” tasked with defining the future of the organisation. It is these people who benefit most from mentoring, according to Pegg.

An organisation needs to empower employees within parameters, as individuals need to know the rules and the rewards, Pegg says. This may seem an old fashioned “command and control” notion but if people know what the “rules” are, they can take a stand (against them, if necessary) and know what is expected of them. Pegg says it’s all about managing two-way expectations. “Ultimately there is only one competence: taking responsibility.” High performers are focused and flexible at the same time, which means that they are visionary but with attention to detail.

SPIRIT LEVELS

Alan Deller, chairman of Tayport Ltd, a London-based software developer for the investment broker market, has vast experience of employing mentors and being a consultant mentor himself for Microsoft, Sony, Freeserve and United Airlines.

He met mentor Mike Pegg 10 years ago when Deller was managing director at Air Miles Travel Promotions Ltd and had a staff of 100. Air Miles was set up in 1988. As a founder, Deller faced the challenge of keeping the positive culture of a small firm as Air Miles grew to 1,200 staff.

Using mentoring for senior staff they tried to find the origin of this culture and formalise it. This was then rolled out to the rest of the company.

In practice this took the form of staff seminars about what people wanted from life. As Deller says “It’s the fundamental principle that business is about life and life is about business. To get the best from people you need to get the whole person and move beyond the ‘9 to 5’ aspect – which is dead, in my view. This is not New Age philosophy, just common sense.”

At Trayport, Deller’s current company, they are trying to recreate the soul work and salary work ethos. Trayport was set up 8 years ago but has taken off in the past 2 years through the internet and deregulation of the European energy sector – which their software caters for. With a workforce of only 20 people at Trayport, Deller is keen to get the right culture in place from the start, as it’s harder to get a retrospective fit.

Again staff seminars are being used to define the individual’s contribution to the spirit of the company and tell them they have choices. “It’s a combination of building team spirit and defining the environment,” Deller emphasises. “The majority of staff are ‘techie’ computer programmers who can be introverted and reactive, so it was challenging to lure them out of their shells.”

This mentoring approach has worked as both a recruitment and retention tool for Trayport. In such a specialist market, word spreads that a culture is employee focused. Deller says the psychological contract is not written down because once you write down an elusive concept such as values, people assume they understand the culture, and that can lead to a superficial approach.

One of Pegg’s clients is Microsoft. Microsoft acknowledges that people need time to re-centre and take a “helicopter view” of their options, and mentoring provides this time and space to reflect. The company believes people need the space to share ideas with an impartial person without a corporate agenda or sub-text. Although the mentor tries to achieve the best for both the organisation and individual, the paymaster – Microsoft – must benefit from the process. Mentoring also helps tackle the challenge of running effective teams when team members are mostly rewarded for individual performance.

Pegg has been working with at Microsoft for more than three years and has built up a “faculty” of 30 – 40 in-house mentors. Individuals choose their mentors from the faculty. They are advised to opt for someone who has a high level of credibility in their eyes and compatible values. The pair then make a clear agreement about what they want to achieve.

There are five widely recognised mentoring models (*see panel on next page*). Microsoft uses the “five C’s” mentoring model, which focuses individuals on the challenges they face and achievable results, the choices open to them, the consequences of each choice, and creative solutions or conclusions.

More recently, Pegg has introduced to Microsoft his concept of “superteams”. This is a system of educating teams in self-improvement. The leader, working with a facilitator, develops a “picture of perfection”. The team then explores the key people they need to satisfy, the results they want, the things they can and can’t control and their responsibilities. At the end they agree on the picture of perfection and who is responsible for what. This then acts as a contract, which they can revisit.

Microsoft has now developed about 15 – 20 teams in this way and HR Professionals are starting to take over the facilitation role: “HR needed to move up the value chain and get into more interesting work,” says Pegg. And Microsoft did not want to become dependant on consultants. The superteams approach can be integrated with mentoring and Microsoft is keen to be able to operate both internally, both some external mentors are used.

A HIGH-FIVE

According to Mike Pegg there are five main types of mentoring:

1. The five C's classic model - as used by Microsoft (main article) - where you work through five steps.
2. The career mentoring model, where you help people find their real calling and focus on their “A” talent rather than “B” or “C” talents, and how this talent will benefit you and the organisation.
3. The creative teamwork model can be used to create superteams, which are based on similarity of spirit and diversity of strengths (Diversity of strength would be disastrous, as your agendas have to align.) For example, the Beatles in the 1960's were a superteam who came together and did something innovative and inspired.
4. Change curve mentoring, which tackles a specific problem.
5. Class act mentoring looks to develop people in a unique niche or specialisation where they can excel.

Steve Harvey, Microsoft's director of people, profits and loyalty, has had Pegg as his mentor for 18 months while simultaneously introducing a mentoring programme for 200 of his top staff.

The value of having independent, externally based mentors, says Harvey, is that they are very different characters and bring a fresh perspective. “It's good to test ideas and express concerns in a non-threatening way,” he says. “I can talk about my motivation, my life plan and how to do soul work as well as salary work. A problem is ensuring that you still have the energy left to do soul work. Mike keeps me focused and is very pragmatic. I've had mentors in the past who've just given you advice then left you to it.”

Pegg spends three days a week in the Microsoft headquarters and meets Harvey face to face once every month. Microsoft uses half-a-dozen mentors to help retain its star performers. These mentors come from the divergent worlds of sport, business and even ballet. “It's all about getting a fit with the individuals concerned,” Harvey says. “You need to match up like-minded mentors and mentees. You rarely get one mentor that suits everyone.”

Microsoft uses a mentor selection process that takes up to two months finding out the employee's “passions in life” before choosing a suitable mentor. “We've seen the toughest two years so far in the IT industry, and I firmly believe that using mentoring to manage our star performers has helped retain them,” says Harvey. He believes an employer who enables people to realise their aspirations is more likely to keep them, even if eventually these dreams lie outside the organisations.

“I meet high-flying people and they rarely have mentors, as there can be an assumption that if you've reached the top you don't need one,” he says. But there is huge value in having an independent, external third party to help you fulfil your aspirations. It's part of life-long learning.”

Harvey plans to continue doing his “soul work” at Microsoft. Last year he moved the internal communications department, which was traditionally part of the marketing department, into the HR department.

The result has been a positive change in how people communicate long-term company strategy. The whole philosophy is about having “engaged employees” that understand where the company is heading and their role within it.

In 2001 Microsoft were ranked an impressive second in *The Times* best employer list and it has won awards for work-life balance.

An unofficial role of the mentor is a talent spotter, although places like Microsoft already have their antennae out. Pegg says we are going to witness a revolution in talent spotting as educationalists and schools take on board mentoring principles.

Pegg has found himself predominantly using the “five C’s”, career mentoring and creative teamwork mentoring, and less “change curve” mentoring. He sees a trend towards “class act” mentoring. “We’re in the age of the ‘never satisfied customer’ and ‘the brilliant niche supplier,’” he says. “The paradox is that the more you become a brilliant niche supplier, the more customers you get.”

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