



## Chapter 1

# Mentoring, Embedded in the Culture

Along the way  
places and people  
planted seeds in my soul and in my spirit  
and added stones to the foundation  
I was trying to form

—LISA FAIN

**AN ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE** profoundly influences its people, processes, and business practices. Its impact is felt and expressed daily, in many ways. Culture also has explanatory value. It explains why things are done in a specific way in an organization, and why specific rituals, language, stories, and customs are shared. In addition to explaining behaviors, culture also sets boundaries and offers stability. Culture is rooted in behavior based on shared values, assumptions, and practices and processes, all of which live within a mentoring culture.

Mentoring requires a culture to support its implementation and fully integrate it into the organization. Without cultural congruence, the challenge of embedding mentoring into the organization is daunting. Any mentoring effort will continuously face challenges that have an impact on its viability and sustainability. For example, an organizational culture that fosters learning strengthens mentoring; if learning is not valued, learning is stifled and mentoring efforts are undermined. As the work of creating a mentoring culture unfolds, mentoring integrates itself more deeply into the organization's culture and becomes embedded in the fabric of the culture. Alignment between the organizational culture and the mentoring effort must be well established in order to promote cultural integration.

A congruent organizational culture becomes the placeholder for mentoring by maintaining its presence on the organizational agenda. It helps ensure its viability and sustainability by making mentoring a cultural expectation and organizational competence. Mentoring is so tightly woven into

the fabric of organizational life that it seamlessly informs the way business is accomplished.

In this chapter, we examine some of the more compelling reasons mentoring works best when it is embedded in organizational culture. We see how a fully embedded mentoring process might look in an ideal scenario and look at what mentoring is in the real world of today.

## The Importance of Embedding Mentoring in the Culture

The importance of embedding mentoring in the organization's culture cannot be overemphasized. Today more organizations are embracing mentoring than ever before, because it adds value for organizations, individuals within the organization, and others with whom they interact. There are compelling business reasons to warrant the effort. Embedding mentoring into an organization's culture

- Establishes ownership. It ensures that mentoring is vested in the many rather than the few. People outside the immediate circle of implementation feel a sense of ownership and responsibility and hold others accountable.
- Promotes shared responsibility. The success of mentoring is explicitly linked to the organization's wider strategic agenda.
- Maximizes resources. Duplication of time, effort, and dollars is minimized because mentoring is integrated with the organization's infrastructure.
- Maintains integrity. Cultural integration helps maintain the integrity of the mentoring practice by ensuring that there is always readiness, opportunity, and support for mentoring.
- Facilitates knowledge utilization. Cultural integration enables an organization to create opportunities to integrate new learning and leverage knowledge gained as a direct result of mentoring.
- Supports integration of key processes into the organization. Mentoring competencies such as feedback and goal setting often improve performance throughout an organization because of the insights gleaned from mentoring training and practice.
- Creates openness to learning through mentoring. People trust mentoring because they know it is a valued practice and see it demonstrated daily.
- Shortens ramp up time. Cultural congruence facilitates creation of a mentoring culture because there is always a level of readiness in the culture.

Some of the many mentoring benefits for individuals are accelerated learning, expanded and diverse perspectives, increased tacit organizational knowledge, additional insights about other business units, and improved skills in specific areas (for example, listening, or building relationships). Mentoring also offers individuals a trusted sounding board, role model, or go-to individual. Individuals often say that as a result of mentoring they feel more self-aware and self-confident; they are more closely connected to the organization, and they find work more satisfying and meaningful.

Not surprisingly, the mentoring benefits realized by individuals redound to the organization on a larger scale. A mentoring culture helps people meet adaptive challenges (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002); it facilitates new learning and organizational resiliency in the face of rapid change. Because it is tethered to the organization's culture, it contributes to organizational stability by managing knowledge and facilitating communication. If workers find work more meaningful and satisfying, retention and organizational commitment are increased, ultimately saving on the costs of rehiring. Increased confidence results in improved performance and quality of work. Individuals become more adept at risk taking. The more positive attitude contributes to increased trust and morale. Expanded perspectives trigger more global and visionary thinking. Mentoring helps manage and maximize knowledge, connecting and pooling pockets of organizational knowledge that strengthen and speed up organizational learning. It facilitates leadership development by building the internal capacity of leadership. Mentoring humanizes the workplace by building relationships of head, heart, and soul.

The benefits of mentoring can have a profound impact on those whom an organization touches: its customers, clients, and the community. The learning gained through mentoring has a ripple effect because it affects others, including those outside of the mentoring relationship. It helps people build new relationships and strengthen existing ones; people become more collaborative in their performance and learning, and individuals feel more prepared to offer themselves as mentors to others.

## An Ideal Scenario

The benefits of embedding mentoring in an organizational culture and the mentoring best practices that contribute to creating a mentoring culture are showcased in Ideal Organization\*, an example drawn from the best practices of mentoring cultures. Learning has long been a high priority at Ideal. The chief executive insists that all senior managers participate in annual executive training, hire an executive coach, and attend seminars at a nearby

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\*Note: All names of companies, organizations, and schools used in this book are fictitious unless otherwise noted.

university. Their direct reports and all managers are required to complete at least thirty-five hours of continuing education annually; this requirement is tied directly to cash compensation and advancement.

The organization recently opened Ideal University (IU) to supply and manage all of its internal continuing education and training needs. This new line of business serves for-profit and nonprofit organizations in the vicinity of its corporate office. Ideal's blended learning programs, which combine state-of-the-art online and face-to-face learning venues, are highly regarded and often used by others to benchmark their organizational learning best practices.

Ideal's internal "Gateway to Learning" Website posts regularly updated information about IU programs and courses as well as a directory of external educational providers. In addition, Gateway houses self-assessment tools to facilitate analysis of individual learning needs and planning of self-directed learning programs. Employees who desire additional assistance access an online learning mentor who is trained to match employee development needs with educational institutions.

Mentoring is a cultural expectation at Ideal. The commitment to mentoring aligns with Ideal's core value of "building bridges of opportunity for employee development." Mentoring grew out of a formal program for high-potentials that began ten years ago. The program created such a buzz throughout the organization that the excitement it generated is still talked about today. The fact that so many "graduates" from the mentoring program commit to mentoring others and seek to initiate mentoring opportunities in their own organizations speaks to its continued success.

Several years ago, an organizational practice survey revealed that in addition to one-on-one informal mentoring and formal mentoring programs, multiple groups were actively engaged in mentoring on the corporate and local level, including women's executive mentoring, technical mentoring, and cross-functional mentoring. Currently, 87 percent of all employees are engaged in at least one informal or formal mentoring relationship. Those who participate in mentoring take it very seriously. Leaders regard it as part of their role as leader to informally mentor employees who show promise.

Today, all new employees are assigned mentors to help them navigate the organization and familiarize them with Ideal's history, values, practices, and policies. Most new employee matches are made using an automated mentoring tool to ensure an optimal learning match. Mentors must attend trainings and are given a list of topics and timelines for covering specific organizational content during the first year of a new hire's employment. At their first annual review, many new employees voice appreciation for the

experience and remark on how quickly the mentoring program enabled them to feel confident, comfortable, and connected to the organization. Mentoring has given them an opportunity to connect with more people and to jump-start their productivity. Once launched, many choose to participate in a formal mentoring group or one-on-one relationship and to find an informal mentor.

All employees, not just new hires, are encouraged to seek mentoring partners and build mentoring partnerships. Everyone knows how and where to find mentoring partners when they need them. Ideal has its own virtual mentoring center, which periodically posts “mentoring want ads.” An online mentor directory assists mentees who want to self-select mentors to help them achieve their learning goals. Human resource specialists or department heads make themselves available to help facilitate mentoring selection and matching.

Senior executives lead the way by finding internal and external mentors to expand their perspective and increase their technical knowledge. Internally, these same executives facilitate mentoring groups and formally and informally mentor employees. One of Ideal’s best practices in this regard is group mentoring sessions; they are so widespread that they are a familiar item on monthly staff meeting agendas. Group mentoring is clearly seen as a valued-added tool for leveraging mentoring success from one department to another. A system is being established so that mentoring can be used to teach best practices across the organization as a new line of business is rolled out.

A full-time mentoring director and support staff are charged with managing, supporting, and coordinating mentoring efforts at Ideal. They monitor progress, measure results, and work with teams throughout the organization to integrate mentoring process improvements. In addition to keeping an internal focus on mentoring, these people work hard at ensuring that all mentoring programs align with each other and with the organizational culture.

An annual “mentoring boot camp” is available to employees who choose to advance their knowledge about the mentoring process, improve their mentoring skills and relationships, or network with other employees who may be potential mentors. Each year a keynote speaker kicks off the week at camp, setting the tone and theme for the week. In addition, a basic core curriculum is offered through IU, consisting of skill building and mentoring-specific content courses that align internally with the content of other IU courses. Advanced mentoring and refresher modules are offered cyclically.

Approximately 15 percent of Ideal’s managers are certified mentoring coaches and often initiate mentoring events in their own departments.

Mentoring coaches must commit to annually upgrading personal mentoring knowledge and practice by attending twenty hours of continuing education as well as meeting once a month as a peer mentoring group.

As good as Ideal's mentoring culture and practices are, the picture was not always so rosy. There were false starts resulting from disparate assumptions about what mentoring is and ought to be. Leadership musical chairs at the top of the organization restructured some of the original mentoring champions out of the organization, thus upending some of the initial efforts. Those who remained were convinced that mentoring would be another corporate fad and didn't feel fully committed to the mentoring planning work they had been charged to deliver. The team regrouped several times and finally created enough common ground to move forward. A task force studied Ideal's culture to determine how to best align the program with corporate values and mission. It was clear to everyone that to successfully launch mentoring, Ideal's culture required a means for financially motivating and rewarding participation. Today, mentoring is so embedded in the culture that the financial incentives have disappeared, and emphasis is placed mainly on public reward and recognition.

Ten years ago, Ideal's technological capacity was quite modest. The mentoring pool was harder to identify, and making matches was a nightmare. Ideal had to struggle with the complex process initially set in place to make it manageable. As the organization grew, so did the capacity of its technology. Overcoming resistance to using technology for the very human task of matching mentor and mentee was difficult. At first, it seemed far too complicated. Yet over time technology has become the primary mentoring communication vehicle, offering a fast and expedient way to collect data, disseminate results, and make information about mentoring readily available throughout the organization. Monthly e-bulletins and quarterly e-newsletters about mentoring are distributed on line.

Initially, the task of establishing feedback and evaluation systems was a struggle. The competitive nature of Ideal's culture led to mistrust, fear of how the data might be used, and anxiety about the repercussions that might follow if confidentiality were ever breached. Today, feedback is a critical component in ensuring that learning from each phase is incorporated into the next phase. The mentoring director and her team methodically gather regular feedback, which in turn enables best practices to be shared and process improvements to be implemented.

Annual surveys reveal that mentoring, both formal and informal, has had a tremendous influence on Ideal's bottom line. Because employees are integrating their learning, they end up working smarter and faster. This enabled one group to close a major deal (beating out a competitor) that will generate revenue for several years. The speed and quality of the group's

proposal process continues to yield major dividends that are directly attributable to the mentoring they have received at Ideal. These are not isolated experiences. In fact, mentoring is seen by many as the main impetus for a steady rise in productivity over the last four years.

Employees report increased collaboration; they are able to better navigate the organization because they know more about it. The retention rate is consistently high. Many point to mentoring relationships as a critical satisfier for them at work. People are committed to the organization; they feel valued by it and value relationships they have formed. They say that the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural mentoring made them feel more comfortable with and connected to one another, and more effective in developing and maintaining relationships with customers from around the globe. There has been a subtle shift from a once internally competitive culture to a trusting and collaborative one.

Ideal continues to build bridges of opportunity internally and externally. It offers reward and recognition to departments that build such bridges by creating innovative mentoring opportunities with demonstrable results. A once-a-year occasion, called “Building Bridges of Opportunity Through Mentoring,” is dedicated to celebration of mentoring excellence, personal and organizational mentoring milestones, and recognition of mentoring bridge builders at Ideal. A new corporate bridge-building initiative includes formation of a strategic alliance with six external organizations to create a mentoring consortium for sharing best mentoring practices.

Mentoring at Ideal is always in motion. The continuous momentum builds learning bridges to the future through mentoring and empowers individuals to transform Ideal to live up to its name. Ideal did not arrive here in one leap; it had to work through a number of steps and phases in developing its mentoring culture.

## Phases of a Mentoring Relationship

Understanding the predictable cycle of the mentoring relationship helps organizations meet the learning and relationship needs that may require support from the organization and its culture. The four phases—preparing, negotiating, enabling, and coming to closure—build on one another to form a developmental sequence. The length of each phase varies with the relationship and is influenced by the culture.

The preparing phase incorporates two components: self-preparation and relationship preparation. Training, materials, and coaching are often needed to get a relationship started off on the right foot.

The work of the second phase, negotiating, results in well-defined learning goals, success criteria and measurement, delineation of mutual

responsibility, accountability, protocols for addressing stumbling blocks, consensual mentoring agreement, and a workplan for achieving learning goals. HR can support the goal-setting process by coaching on goal setting or helping to ensure that the learning goal aligns with other development goals.

Most of the work of the relationship is accomplished in the third, and typically longest, phase of enabling. The enabling phase offers the greatest opportunity for learning and development, yet mentoring partners often face challenges during this time that make them vulnerable to relationship derailment. This is the phase where support in the way of networking and sharing best practices is most helpful.

The final phase, coming to closure, presents a dynamic learning opportunity for mentors and mentees to process their learning and move on, regardless of whether a mentoring relationship has been positive. The focus of coming to closure is on reaching a learning conclusion so that learning is elevated to the next level of application and integration. Success is celebrated, the relationship is redefined, and mentoring partners move on. Just-in-time training to support mentoring partners as they prepare the relationship for closure helps ensure a good experience. An organized mentoring celebration affords the opportunity to share best practices, encouraging networking around mentoring and supporting people as they take their learning to the next level.

The people at Ideal understand the phases of the mentoring cycle and the importance of embedding mentoring within the culture at large. They know, from experience, that mentoring requires a lot of work, from the organization and the individuals. They know, also from experience, how worthwhile the effort is.

## **Embedding Mentoring: Reflection on Practice**

Whether your organization is large or small, it is important to be able to stand back and look at your organizational culture analytically—to be fully aware of the “soul” and “spirit” that forms its cultural foundation. Without some degree of cultural consciousness, it is impossible to do the cultural due diligence required to embed mentoring into your organization. Effective mentoring initiatives can and do exist without the support of an established mentoring culture, but inevitably they require more work, a longer ramp-up time, and unwavering and conscientious persistence to maintain and ensure programmatic growth and long-term continuity. The struggle to create a mentoring culture—the challenge—can actually drive the alignment process. The struggle will be continuous unless mentoring itself is congruent with the culture and has meaning for it. Creating a mentoring culture is well worth the effort, especially in a world in which constant learning and change are the foundation.