



## **AFTER THE PILOT: ISSUES IN ROLLING-OUT A MENTORING PROGRAMME**

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One of the critical points in building a sustainable mentoring programme is when the pilot is coming to an end and the roll-out being planned. Some of the most common problems experienced include:

- You have now used up all the easy targets, in terms of volunteer mentors. The programme manager will typically have called in favours from colleagues and senior level contacts, but now it is time to bring in people, who are likely to be less easily persuaded.
- Resources for the pilot can be a lot easier to obtain than for the roll-out. The organisation's expectations of the investment in time and money may be very different. It's common for top management to underfund substantially the unit cost per relationship, when the programme is extended to larger numbers. Although there are savings in unit costs, there will still be a need for continued investment in training, support and measurement.
- Top management's attention can be distracted by other priorities, so harnessing their support in promoting the programme may be more difficult.

### **Maintaining the flow of volunteer mentors**

This is the point, where the real marketing begins. If you have good relationships with the marketing function in your organisation, they may well be able to help. Some practical tips include:

- Asking existing mentors to recommend a friend – someone, who has not been a mentor, but who they feel has the potential to do so.
- Inviting employees in general to nominate their boss as a potential mentor. (This not only makes the boss feel positive and more confident about their ability to undertake the role, but helps engage line managers more generally.)
- Use existing mentees and mentors as champions. Create a short generic presentation they can take around about the programme and encourage them to add slides about their own experience.
- Get publicity from both the employee newspaper and other journals - it all helps to make people want to be part of the action.
- Produce a video of participants talking about their experiences. Distribute it through as many channels as possible. (For example, podcast it.) If possible, get the CEO to introduce it.

### **Maintaining the funding**

The first rule is to ensure that the continued funding requirement does not come as a surprise to the programme sponsors. In signing off the pilot, they should understand that a continuing investment will be needed.

Other groundrules include:

- Don't allow quality to be compromised by quantity. A relatively small number of effective, high quality learning relationships has much more power to change the culture than a large number of marginally effective, low quality ones.
- Focus sponsors' attention on unit cost rather than total cost. Unit cost should always fall from a pilot to a roll-out.
- Key places to save costs may include putting support and admin processes, such as matching and post-training general information on mentoring on-line. Key elements of the programme to preserve in the face of cost containment include sufficient initial training and subsequent review/ skills development to ensure that mentor and mentee have the vision and competence to make the relationship work. It may well prove most cost-effective to bring training and programme design skills in-house.

Overall, it's important to be very clear to sponsors about what they should expect for their money and what size and scope of programme is compatible with the budget intended. As one programme manager expressed it: 'I presented top management with a stark choice. Either we continued with a small programme, based on a reduced budget from the pilot; or we acknowledged the success of the programme but came clean that we had other priorities for the cash, so we would close it down. Anything else would have been dishonest or would have been a waste of money.'

### **Maintaining top management's attention**

The problem with initiatives is that they are automatically perceived as short-term, passing events. Creating a sustainable mentoring programme, or better still, an organisational capability in mentoring, requires a much longer term commitment and investment of emotional energy. Again, the time to manage expectations is during the pilot programme, when the issue of sustainability should be a regular item on the agenda of feedback to sponsors.

A critical element here is maintaining top management's 'sense of wonder'. Whether they are mentors or not, providing them with a regular drip feed of skills improvement in learning dialogue (which they can also use in their line manager responsibilities) helps to revive interest. You might also consider:

- Having the programme progress report to them delivered not by the programme manager, but by a group of mentors or mentees.
- Co-opting the sponsors' own mentors, if they have them, into thinking about how to maintain the programme profile.
- Don't take their support for granted. Find practical ways to say 'thank you' both publicly and privately.

### **One more thing...**

There is one other, essential ingredient in a sustainable roll-out. The programme coordinator must recognise how much effort will be needed on their part to hold it all together. The pilot is just the beginning. The role doesn't necessarily get harder; but it will demand consistency, tenacity and long-term energy. There will come a point, however, when all that effort pays off and the programme becomes self-sustaining, needing only a light touch to keep it on course.

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