

MENTOR ME

A recent survey shows mentoring is building momentum in New Zealand, but largely on an informal basis, say Wendy Baker and Aly McNicoll. They outline the findings.

WE OFTEN INSTINCTIVELY TURN TO AN experienced person when needing guidance or a sounding board. This informal mentoring is usually done casually over lunch or a coffee and is often a by-product of another relationship.

Formal mentoring takes this natural process and gives it a structure that provides support and growth through a clear framework and guidelines. It is not just done in times of crisis or when you 'need it', but on a regular basis which creates opportunities for ongoing learning.

Mentoring equips people with the tools, knowledge and opportunities to fully develop, personally and professionally. It is not performance management per se. It is a learning conversation with the mentor facilitating the learning. A good mentor asks questions to help people reflect and reach their own insights.

A recent New Zealand Mentoring Centre snapshot survey found mentoring is building momentum within New Zealand organisations, but largely on an informal rather than formal basis. We found 67 percent of respondents used mentoring and coaching within their workplace. The most common reason was to address individual performance issues (73 percent), followed by helping with transition (61 percent), enhancing the quality of work done in the organisation (58 percent) and leadership development (56 percent).

According to respondents, mentoring is most effective when it is well resourced, and there is access to people with mentoring skills. It shouldn't be forced upon people and needs a clear commitment from senior management, including the chief executive. Lack of time, heavy workload and organisational understanding caused problems.

Informal mentoring is far more common than formal, according to the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents had experienced informal mentoring. This can be problematic for HR personnel because infor-

mal mentoring is more difficult to measure than formal mentoring and can result in less focus on organisational direction.

According to research by David Lane, a British mentoring and coaching expert, problems arise with informal mentoring relationships when the relationship becomes more important than the learning.

We would add that such relationships can also become too comfortable, too familiar and less challenging. Informal mentoring can also perpetuate social exclusion because often only those who are confident and ambitious find a mentor.

Those survey respondents who were in formal mentoring programmes felt they provided better access and higher quality mentoring opportunities. "It's meant closer working relationships across the organisation and more consistent quality company outcomes—doors have opened," says one.

Formal mentoring also provides benefit for the trained mentor who can transfer those skills to other areas of the workplace. "My skills became transferable to other line management roles," says another respondent.

It also purposely and deliberately serves the interests of the organisation and individual. The former retains talented people and the latter gains career development. "Senior management agreed to formalise mentoring in the organisation to grow our next generation of business leaders and reduce staff turnover," says one respondent.

We believe informal mentoring has value, but by strategically adding formal mentoring into the learning and development mix organisations gain greater benefit from their greatest resource; their own people.

In the next issue, NZ Mentoring Centre will outline the five keys to a successful mentoring programme. **et**

Wendy Baker and Aly McNicoll are directors of the New Zealand Mentoring Centre. Visit www.mentorcentre.co.nz



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