
The New Corporate Ladder is Round: A New Mentoring Model to Fit the Changing Shape of Business

by **Beverly L. Kaye, Beverly Bernstein Olevin, and Mary Ammerman**

Mentoring relationships have changed from traditional and hierarchical to dynamic relationships that are contemporary, open, and flexible. Individuals can now learn from each other in reciprocal partnerships where they are both the giver and receiver of wisdom and information. Modern mentoring is designed to boost individual capability and corporate capacity by giving individuals the tools to see and create a learning network. Multiple mentoring relationships can form at all levels of a company which in turn stimulates the growth and development of a learning culture in an organization.

Partnerships with mutual respect as Knowledge is the new currency in organizations, and in today's changing times, corporations can benefit from structuring mentoring relationships that maximize the knowledge of each employee. What is needed is a model for mentoring which weaves together networking and mentoring to build the bottom line. This approach helps organizations bend the obsolete corporate ladder into a new form, one that takes advantage of the intellectual capital of all employees.

The notion of climbing the corporate ladder is daily becoming more and more outdated. It is based on a hierarchical model of work, vertical reporting lines, status and power. This model of workflow assumes that chain-of-command is the best or most effective way to communicate. These are no longer the structures and characteristics of today's organizations. The reality in today's world of work: many corporations are changing to a team structure; cross-functional knowledge is becoming a new kind of currency in the business world; resilience and nontraditional thinking are highly valued at all levels in cutting edge organizations; "mutual benefit" and "partnering solutions" are cornerstones of the now learning organization model; "portable skills" are multi-layered and multi-focused; "knowledge workers" are paid to understand and think in a variety of new ways; "coaching" is included in expected results and competency lists for managers and supervisors; peer consultation is becoming the norm.

Then why you might ask, do we continue to hear about a hierarchical model of mentoring? One that sets up a one-on-one model? One where there is someone more "senior" who brings along someone who is more junior? One which is vertically defined? Shouldn't the new model be round? Or pretzel-shaped? Or three-dimensional?

Reciprocal Mentoring Relationships

In recent years we have noticed an evolution in the way people think about mentoring. They are seeing a need for these relationships to be more flexible, open and non-hierarchical. Mentors, in fact, might be the mentor in one relationship and the mentee in another. The "good of the corporation" is often the sum of the "good of individuals." Reciprocal relationships of giving and receiving strengthen the impact of mentoring, and deliver much more long-term value to the corporation than traditional mentoring.

Peter Senge's notions of a learning organization support this new, more versatile version of mentoring. With structural boundaries becoming more fluid in organizations, and the growing importance of working across functional boundaries or in "virtual" teams across broad geographical areas, the very nature of mentoring and information sharing must change to keep up with the times. Individuals invested in their own development will search for a variety of mentors who have different skill sets, different histories with the organization, and different perspectives.

Far from the paternalistic patterns of the past, where the organization felt the responsibility to provide for the individual, today's savvy workers are assuming the responsibility for their own development. This involves thinking

creatively, setting long-term goals and having a proactive approach to personal and professional growth. It is the preferred way for most individuals to take charge of their own destiny and to design multiple visions for success. If one fails, another strategy is close at hand.

In today's changing times, corporations benefit from mentoring by maximizing the knowledge each person develops. Knowledge is the new valued currency in organizations. Unless corporations develop ways to pass knowledge around more effectively, they are stuck with delayed productivity, tunnel vision, and inefficiencies. Reciprocal mentoring can provide an antidote for these conditions, building a solid infrastructure that leaves the corporation strong in the face of continuing change.

New professionals (or those transitioning to new roles) need ways to speed up their learning curve. By most estimates, getting knowledgeable about the business, its clients, philosophies and relationships may take a new employee as much as 12-14 months. Sharing information across functional boundaries, setting the new employee up for credibility and status by teaching him what he needs to know, makes him able to make a meaningful contribution much sooner. Without a mechanism for quick learning, a new sales representative will have to cover the same information ground as her predecessor. This is inefficient for her, and possibly annoying to the customer. It also creates a lag in business activity while the sales rep becomes familiar with company and customer procedures. With an effective mentor and a progressive plan, this individual can be productive in 3-4 months.

An Antidote to Tunnel Vision: Varied and Multiple Relationships

To embrace this model, the organization must be ready to accept the fact that varied relationships are required to give the individual all the information and support required for success. Many organizations use a kind of "buddy system" to bring new employees aboard. In such a situation, the new employee shadows or is coached by a peer who does the same work. This arrangement provides an opportunity to learn procedures, be introduced to others, and identify pitfalls recognized by those already in the system. While this is helpful, it creates a kind of "tunnel vision" for the employee. He or she has the practical knowledge to do the job function as a peer interprets it, but this method leaves large gaps for the individual who also wants to connect a wider array of individuals in the organization. The ability to influence decisions and gain access to information in a crisis comes from building relationships: many of them, at all levels, and across functional boundaries. Appropriate multi-dimensional mentoring can shape these relationships in a shorter time frame, positioning the individual for success far sooner than it would happen through ordinary and sequential events. In addition, multiple relationships have a correction capability. Biases or faulty interpretations of one individual are less likely to be transferred permanently to the learner.

Individuals who have grown over time through mentoring have a larger view of the organization, its culture, its success stories and interrelationships. They are better prepared to fill a variety of roles as they grow in their careers. If they have had multiple mentors who have themselves had successes in a variety of roles, the protegee's understanding of the business is broader and deeper than learning in a linear model can produce. These individuals make better candidates for supervisory and managerial positions as they come open, creating bench strength and preventing gaps when current managers and supervisors are promoted. The implications for effective development of high potential candidates and succession planning are clear.

In one high-tech organization, high turnover in a particular technical position was crippling the department. The ability to attract individuals with baseline skills was reduced due to market conditions and the reputation of the department. As a result, just to fill the positions, managers were forced to hire candidates with marginal skills and hope to train them for the job as they worked. This, of course, elongated the learning process and further reduced the department's ability to provide services. A group of managers developed a solution that included a development program geared to ensure baseline skills were in place.

Systematic skills development combined with careful mentoring of individuals raised the measurable skills of the entire technical group and provided a faster path to promotions into higher-skilled units. As a result, turnover in the unit has decreased to less than 1%. Most technicians who leave are now leaving for reasons beyond the company's ability to influence, or are moving to higher ranks within the technical division of the company. Mentoring in these times is more than soaking up knowledge from those who have been successful. Early models of mentoring positioned the mentee as a learner with those who had achieved great successes. The idea was a transfer of knowledge (facts about the organization, its culture and its business) and wisdom (interpretation and judgment) to the learner through the stories of both success and failure experienced by the mentor.

Today's business reality requires that the successful individual not only understand the system, but also be able to influence and impact it. Personal credibility and entry into the places where decisions are made must support knowledge and skill. This requires access to those who influence and define success criteria for the organization.

A New Mentoring Model for the Round Ladder

Today's mentoring model will work best if it is a combination of mentoring and networking. Mentoring provides the knowledge and understanding, and networking provides the access. The new concept is designed to boost individual capability and corporate capacity by giving individuals the tools to seek and create a reciprocal learning network. The new mentoring relationship is both giving and receiving – a reciprocal relationship where everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher. A mentor is no longer the master nor is his or her partner the apprentice. Instead, both parties work together with mutual respect as the bottom line. People come together to create a mutual learning opportunity that fosters a belief in six new mindsets:

A Non-Hierarchical Mindset

Networking and mentoring can occur across all levels of an organization. A senior person can learn just as much from a junior employee as the new employee can learn from the seasoned professional. These are golden opportunities to update skills and help everyone stay on top of changes in their field.

"Most people mentor every day and don't even know it," says Karin Stuart Director of Curriculum Development for Research and Development at Eastman Kodak Co. in Rochester, N.Y. "For example, our new hires are literally the best and the brightest. Those individuals bring their state of the art knowledge and technical expertise. They're necessary and important mentors to the rest of us." Most organizations, unfortunately, don't see the mentoring capacity of this rich resource.

A Fluid Mindset

Peter Vail calls the workplace of today "permanent white water." Since work situations are constantly evolving, individuals will need to monitor their networks and add to them. They will also have to define the changes that impact their jobs and ask themselves if their current network is the right one. Wise employees update their networks as their job and career needs change.

A Multiple Learning Mindset

Learning relationships consist of multiple learning partnerships that are designed to meet a variety of needs and goals. It's unrealistic to think that one mentor can be all things at all times. Individuals need to assess their current learning needs and expand their mentoring relationship accordingly.

A Reciprocal Mindset

Giving back to mentors who have offered help is essential. But true reciprocal learning also means giving back to the profession, the organization, and even the community.

An On-Going Mindset

There is no short-term fix, but rather a long-term commitment to giving and receiving learning. Great networks aren't built overnight. They require patience in order to be most effective. "Mentoring is a self-perpetuating cycle," says Tom Dougherty, Director of Space and Earth Science Programs at Lockheed Martin in San Jose, California. "Individuals who are good mentors beget others who are good mentors. It's a win-win for a company and the people."

A Conscious-Thinking Mindset

Building learning relationships is a deliberate activity. Individuals need to consciously build relationships over the course of their career. For some people, building learning relationships comes naturally. But most of us have to work at it. Determine what you most need to learn and what you can contribute in return. "Few people mentor naturally," says Karin Stuart of Eastman Kodak. "What mentoring really means is how you help someone navigate a company for themselves. People need clues and advice - it's that simple."

These mindsets are conducive to building a culture where differences are minimized and collaboration and problem-solving is maximized.

A Greater Variety of Relationships and Styles

One value of the new model for learners is the greater variety of individuals to learn from. With exposure to different styles of thinking and experience, professionals are able to choose what fits with their style of communicating and learning. This requires that an individual have not one, but many mentors, sometimes concurrently. Different mentors teach and coach about different aspects of the business.

In today's world of business, things move fast. It is required that all of us learn to be strategists and take care that we stay in alignment with the organization's vision and goals. Earlier models of mentoring assumed that the "real" knowledge existed in senior members of the organization. A good bit of it does. But in the world of business technology and rapid change, all of us need to develop a variety of specialized areas. With this knowledge comes the opportunity to share our expertise with those who need it. Using the new reciprocal mentoring model, secretaries are coaching managers on desktop technology, sales professionals are coaching technical experts on negotiating and solidifying relationships, technical developers are coaching business experts on how to make business processes more efficient and error-free. It's the "round" model!

The more an individual assists with the learning of others, the more valuable he or she becomes to the organization, and the more doors open for his or her own learning. Reciprocity builds a solid foundation for achieving business results.

"When I concentrate on both mentoring and networking I see the company and my work differently. I am connected to more people now, and I have been able to make a substantial contribution by mentoring others. I am able to see the inter-connectedness of different functions of our business. I feel that I belong to something bigger than my current role. This makes me a more valuable employee for my company."

Employee and Manufacturing Organization Strategies for Implementation

Most organizations are aware that the "picture" of success today will not be the picture of success tomorrow. As technology proliferates and the world moves faster, the value of leveraging knowledge in organizations will escalate. A hit-and-miss approach to developing people will not achieve the desired results. For definitive results to occur, organizations (and people in them) must develop the strategies and skills to master reciprocal learning. We would urge you to consider the following as a part of your strategy:

- Learners need to be proactive in their search for mentors around them as well as accepting responsibility for their own learning. Otherwise, opportunities to expand their knowledge may pass them by.
- Look for daily doses of mentoring.
- Look for "coachable moments" – those minutes each day when you have the opportunity to learn a lesson, receive feedback, or just listen.
- Expand your personal view of learning. Define how others can assist you. Everyone has something to give and information to share, regardless of their level in the organization.
- Play hard in the beginning. Create a plan of action with your mentor that includes a definition of what you need from them, what they need from you, how often you'll get together, what type of activities you'll do together, and the roles they will play. Mentor partners often attend meetings together, debrief afterwards, discuss lessons learned from projects and life experiences, compare views on corporate direction and their individual roles, and build coaching development plans.

- Cast a wide net – Regard every person you come in contact with as a personal network contact. Make notes about how you met the person and what you spoke about. Look beyond the usual suspects to your neighbors, doctor, mechanic, and clergy.
- If you're on an island, build a bridge – If the workday finds you isolated, add networking to your calendar.
- Keep visible.
- Initiate contact. Let others know what you're working on, your current projects, and offer to help others via telephone and electronic mail. Be careful of "fading away."
- Seize the moment – Be honest with yourself about the time, energy, money, and commitment required to network. Before you begin building an extensive network, prioritize your objectives for networking, make a list of individuals who are/could be a part of your network, and weigh your commitment to extending your network.

Tips for the Real World

Mentoring relationships play a vital role in a world where people are required to continually develop their talents and expand their skills. Learning from many mentors increases opportunities for everyone. Your involvement in multiple learning relationships supports healthy learning organizations and supports your own personal and professional growth. Consider becoming a mentor and a mentee at the same time. Jump on the round corporate ladder and go for a spin!

About the authors

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Beverly Bernstein Olevin is a playwright, and is the author of short stories, books, and training instruments. She earned the Bachelor of Arts degree in Theater and Literature at UCLA, and the Master of Fine Arts at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. Her latest play, "*Soundings*," premiered in Los Angeles at the Odyssey Theater on May 12, 2001. She has written and directed over 20 of her own plays. She also directs plays by others, including the sold-out production in Los Angeles of Tom Stoppard's "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*." Another of her plays was "*Substance of Fire*," presented at Theater 40 in Los Angeles. She authored a novel, *The Breath of Juno*, published in 1996 by Alcorn Press in Michigan. She has written over 40 published short stories, including "*The Gypsy Moon*," published in 1996 by *Ms. Magazine*. Previously, her career in industry included working in training and development at Mattel Toys, where she hired Beverly L. Kaye to present a training program. Subsequently, she has worked with Dr. Kaye for the past 20 years inventing various instruments and training processes for application to corporate needs. One of these inventions is **The Creative Mind Profile**, which helps a person to identify how they are creative.

She also developed recently with Beverly Kaye an instrument, **Employee Retention Deficit Disorder**, which helps human resource people find out what is causing them to fail at employee retention. One of their most popular instruments, which has sold two million copies, is **Investing in Your Values**. Her articles on mentoring, creativity and innovation have appeared in many publications including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Personnel Journal*. She is a frequent speaker at conferences, and has presented seminars for UCLA. In her early career, she was an Associate Director of Non-Collegiate Studies with the California State Universities Headquarters. There she analyzed corporate training programs to determine their equivalent academic credit value.

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