

Reflections from the Field

Key Success Factors in Implementing Sustainable Mentor Programmes in Large Organisations

Carola Hieker [✉](#) (Richmond, The American International University in London, UK)
Maia Rushby (Diversity-in-Leadership, UK)

Abstract

It is widely recognised that mentoring is key for retention, employee performance and a culture of learning and development (Clark 2017), however, organisations are still struggling to implement a sustainable framework where mentoring can flourish. This article critically reflects on how to make mentoring programmes successful and sustainable in large global organisations. Based on data collected from the coaching and supervision notes of five international coaches in two global organisations between 2013 and 2017, the article develops practical recommendations on how mentoring can be supported by different stakeholders so that mentor programmes can be used as a sustainable development tool. It aims to bring clarity to the concept of mentoring and offers clear guidelines for diverse organisations and institutions on how to set up mentor programmes and which pitfalls need to be avoided. It also reviews key drivers of mentor programmes, assesses the benefits for the individual and organisation and reflect on trends in mentor programmes such as reverse mentoring.

Keywords

Mentor programme design, matching process, mentor supervision, reverse mentoring, sustainable mentoring,

Article history

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Introduction

Human Resources (HR) departments have always been responsible for the development of employees. For the so-called 'soft-skill' training which focuses on behavioural skills such as communication, handling conflict, team and leadership competencies, it has been common practice for companies to outsource most of their people development initiatives to external providers. These trainers and coaches were hired to run off-the-shelf training programmes or deliver tailor-made packages to develop the company's workforce. Management tools such as the balanced

scorecard (Kaplan 1996) were used by HR professionals to measure progress and bring transparency to the success of these development initiatives.

Almost naively, this process was seen as best-practice for HR departments and was thought of as an ideal way of developing talent in a structured, clear and measurable way. However, over the last decade, there has been recognition that developing a well-trained, resilient workforce is not as straight-forward as the HR profession had hoped. One unintended consequence of the almost complete outsourcing of 'people development' to external professionals was that senior leaders withdrew from the responsibility of developing their junior staff and became less involved in the day-to-day questions and concerns of their teams. In addition, growing budget limitations forced HR departments to reconsider their priorities and reduce their spend with external providers.

As a first step, senior managers were encouraged to act more as coaches for their team. (Peterson, 1996). Coaching skills-based training such as active listening, asking insightful questions and how to provide helpful and timely feedback was introduced to help managers to be better mentors. As a consequence, line managers were more involved in the development of their teams, offering tailored approaches depending on individual needs.

With the growing expectation that a manager had to act as a coach, the potential role conflict involved for a manager who is also responsible for independently assessing the performance of the individual was recognised (Manikuttu, 2005; Clutterbuck, 2018). This recognition supported the concept of a mentor complementing the role of the line manager and HR experts realised the potential of implementing mentoring in a structured way to make it accessible, especially for more junior employees.

Figure 1: HR trends over the last decade

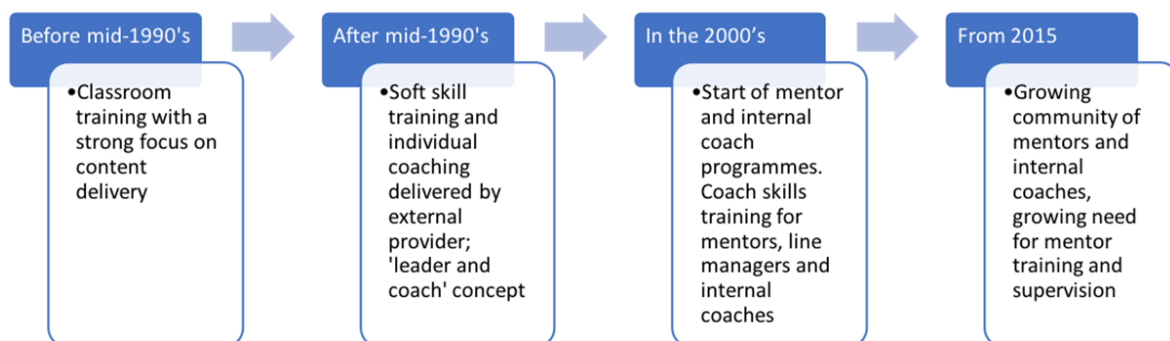


Figure 1 gives an overview of the above described change in HR strategy and involvement in employee development. It summarises the move from content driven training to a rising focus on the delivery of behaviour skills training. It also shows the growing trend in the last decade to train internal resources to cover the different roles of line manager, mentor and internal coach to support employees throughout their career. Finally, it shows that by taking people development responsibility internally, mentor training and supervision for the mentor is key to ensure that mentoring is positioned effectively and sustainable in an organisation.

In this article, the terms 'mentor', 'mentorship programme' and 'mentee' are used. However, it is acknowledged that in literature some aspects of sponsoring are included, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. More recently, some organisations have enriched the mentor role with some features of sponsoring and mentors are held directly responsible for the career progression of their mentees. (Paddison 2013, Catalyst, 2016).

Methodology

Since this is an exploratory study of participants' lived experiences of mentoring, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable. The data collected was not originally intended for research purposes but exists independently of the researchers interest in the topic and setting. It's an analysis of coaching and supervision notes and post-programme evaluation interviews with HR professionals, mentees and mentors, described as heterogenous data by Bell et al (Bell et al, 2015). The selection was taken from the most memorable and transformative narratives shared between the coaches who worked on the projects. The data was collected between 2013 and 2017 across two global organisations with five international coaches of four different nationalities. Over 150 individuals were involved in the mentoring/interviewing process. To ensure confidentiality of the participants, the company name and individual participant names are not referred to.

Whilst striving for objectivity and truthfulness it is recognised that subconscious selection might have taken place at two levels: the first level when the notes were written by coach/supervisor and the second when the notes were selected by the researchers for this paper. It has to be acknowledged that the researchers perspective is an element of the analysis, there is no single reality but knowledge is seen as provisional and context dependent. Therefore, the results are cocreated by researcher and coach/supervisor, are social constructionist in nature (Charmaz, 2007) and are provisional and context dependent. The resultant narratives are presented in italics.

Future research might benefit from a more structured data collection approach e.g. a long term study including quantitative and qualitative data collection at the beginning, in the middle and two to three data collection points at the end of a mentor programme.

Key features of mentor programmes

Many publications emphasise the importance of mentoring (Murphy, 2018) claiming that mentoring is 'necessary but insufficient for advancement' (Carter 2010) as well as that the mentor-mentee relationship is the 'relationship you need to get right' (Hewlett et al. 2011). Most practitioners would also agree with Clark (2017) that a 'career needs many mentors, not just one' and that mentoring is key to a successful career.

Tjan (2017) describes what the best mentors do, namely developing a genuine, inter-collegial relationship with the mentee, to uncover their strengths and help them to advance. In larger organisations where the number of people may inhibit informal, easy and cross-hierarchical communication, an HR team is usually needed to introduce the concept of mentoring. Traditionally HR would encourage junior employees to find a mentor or for senior leaders to find the right junior employee to initiate the relationship. At this basic level, the main focus is to offer junior employees insight into more senior levels in the organisation which hopefully will stimulate ambition for development, growth and promotion.

Mentoring at the right time

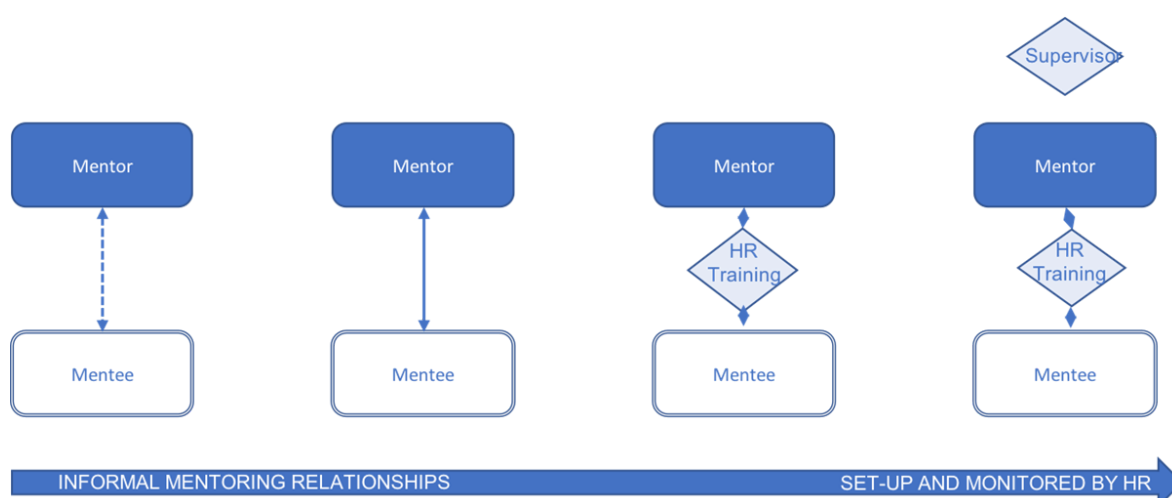
The sometimes life-long influence of this rather informal mentor relationship was well summarised by Sandra, a senior relationship partner in the IT team. She remembered that she felt lonely and terrified in a financial services company at the start of her career. Studying computer science at university had already given her insight into how it would be to work in an almost 100% male dominated environment, but the first few months in her new job made her feel more isolated than she had ever been. At its most extreme, this feeling of loneliness came to a point where she thought of resigning to find an organisation where she would feel less 'alien'. However, meeting Penny, the head of product development, changed her perspective. Penny asked her directly how she was coping in this male working environment and quickly shared memories of her own

anxieties, frustrations and feeling of loneliness that she experienced, especially at the beginning of her career. She also mentioned that she was lucky to have had a mentor at this time: a person she could go to, who supported her and listened when she felt stuck. Penny offered to be Sandra's mentor - to offer Sandra the support that she had received, and now Sandra has someone to go to to discuss challenging situations, or when she just feels a bit isolated.

In many larger global organisations, it is not just the idea of finding a mentor that is supported, but formal mentor programmes are introduced and resources allocated by HR. As well as setting up a framework, organising the logistics and supporting the matching process (see below) some organisations offer specialist mentor training and supervision.

Figure 2 shows how a mentor relationship can vary in the amount of structure and support provided by HR, from a very informal relationship (represented by the dotted line) to the well-structured mentor programmes, sometimes including the offer of supervision for allocated mentors.

Figure 2: Formalisation of mentor relationships



Best practice mentor programmes

Organisations that want to benefit most from mentoring can implement comprehensive mentor programmes that are best practice in the field. Depending on the defined talent development strategy, many mentor programmes aim to attract and retain high potential employees by supporting them in their development as well as building an internal network. To make sure the mentor programme is successful, different criteria need to be considered (Chopra 2017), for example the regularity and purpose of meetings between mentor and mentee.

In addition, the following key pillars support best practice mentor programmes (Hieker & Rushby 2016):

1. Clear objectives aligned with the talent development strategy and supported by senior leaders
2. A facilitated matching process
3. Training and supervision of the mentors
4. Programme evaluation

Clear objectives

In some of the organisations the authors supported the objectives of the mentor programme were very clear, for example to facilitate cross-hierarchical collaboration, strengthen retention and performance in general. However, Garvey notes that often a mentor programme is part of a

portfolio of initiatives, for example to develop high potential employees to senior management, increase diversity at the senior leader level and/or create a tranche of diverse role-model employees (Garvey 2018).

In addition to the alignment of objectives, continuous communication can help to reiterate the strategic importance of mentor programmes. Some organisations even brand their mentor programmes (McKinsey 2019) to build desirability, for example 'High Potential Mentor Programme'.

Matching process

Most research shows that trust between mentor and mentee is essential for a fruitful mentor relationship (Chopra 2017, Tjan 2017, Johnson & Smith 2018). Also, the mentor's people development skills, interest in junior talent and acknowledgment of the importance of communication across hierarchies are key to success. Malota goes even further by showing that the intrinsic motivation is the 'salient factor in the propensity to mentor' (Malota 2017). Therefore, the challenge for HR is how to match mentors with mentees; in general, there will be a cohort of junior employees who have been identified as potential mentees and ideally a 'bank' of mentors who have made themselves available for the programme. As the mentor's role is usually voluntary in addition to their day-to-day responsibilities, it needs to be remembered that the time of the mentor is limited. Therefore, it is recommended that mentors have no more than 2-3 mentees to support at any one time which allows them enough time to spend with each mentee to make it worthwhile.

To optimise the matching of mentors to mentees, some sophistication can be added to the process – guidance to avoid 'favourites' and 'fall-outs'. The introduction of chemistry meetings (a common tool for introducing external coaches to a coachee) can significantly improve the success of the mentor relationship. Without an appropriately planned and managed matching process, an organisation might be faced with a small group of 'favourite' mentors who crystallise; people who are seen as nice, approachable, helpful and influential. Even though the awareness about this group of 'favourite' mentors (as well as the group of unsuitable mentors) is usually not official, reputation and informal recommendations spread quickly, and the organiser of the mentor programme may be confronted with the problem that some mentors have far too many mentees while others might not be in demand at all.

The importance of the matching process

Sophia was pleased and excited when she was informed by HR that she had been selected to be part of a small group of managers seen to have the potential to take over a senior leadership role in the organisation. In addition to regular 'breakfast meetings' with board members, she was also introduced to a senior leader, Chris, with a view to initiating a mentor relationship. Immediately she tried to organise a meeting with the Chris' PA and was offered time slots for a phone conversation in 2 weeks' time. Sophia knew that Chris was based in the same building, so she asked the PA for a face-to-face meeting. The PA's answer was that Chris liked to have his mentor sessions on the phone when he was in the car or at the airport. Sophia's strong preference was for face to face, so she was not motivated by the thought of a phone call.

As can be seen in this example, within the framework of a managed matching process, Sophia would have known about Chris's preference for telephone conversations and would have had the opportunity to avoid this match in preference for a mentor who liked to meet face to face; this would have meant the relationship would have got off to a better start.

Mentor training and supervision

Having good rapport and a willing mentor does not guarantee that the mentor programme's objectives will be achieved. Good coaching skills are important for a mentor and therefore for the success of a mentor relationship as well. While some mentors might have a natural tendency to be good listeners and are empathetic to ensure that their mentees feel comfortable during the discussions, this skillset cannot be taken for granted.

Trained mentors foster insightful conversations

Mark, a highly respected and talented accountant was matched with Andy, a senior partner who had the reputation of being great in building up client networks and selling projects. The mentorship was supposed to focus on improving Mark's sales skills as well as gently introducing Mark to Andy's client network. After the contact was set-up Andy pro-actively approached Mark, expressed his delight about having him as a mentee and setup a lunch date a week later. Mark really enjoyed the lunch with Andy who had the reputation for selling big projects, having a stellar network and was well regarded by all his clients. Even more impressively, Andy suggested to meet on a monthly basis as he had to 'have lunch' anyway and was delighted to share his experience with Mark. However, Mark's initial euphoria about this mentor relationship slowed down after realising that every lunch followed the same pattern - Andy talking about himself, showing off by name-dropping and showing no interest in helping Mark to develop his sales skills or give guidance on how to build up a client network. It was also very clear that Andy's client relationships were very personal and could not be leveraged.

Mark's experience shows that successful mentoring is not guaranteed just by smart matching. In this case, the matching seemed to be good fit looking at Mark's learning needs and Andy's skills-set, however, Andy's lack of self-awareness and poor listening skills prevented a beneficial mentor relationship from being developed.

To develop best-in-class mentors, HR teams need to support and equip potential mentors by offering guidelines around the purpose and benefits of mentoring (Chopra 2017), a toolkit around logistics as well as an opportunity to exchange with peers. However, in addition to skills-based training the mentor will profit even more from on-going supervision to make sure that the relationship stays professional, conversations solution oriented and mentor-mentee meetings stay productive.

Mentor supervision guarantees sustainable mentor performance

Mike, a motivated senior leader and mentor in the commercial law team, always felt exhausted after meeting with his coachee Isabelle. Whilst he was determined to keep the mentor meetings positive and help Isabelle to master her day-to-day challenges in a very aggressive and competitive environment, he often felt that Isabelle's frustration and anger was contagious and sucked his own energy as well. He also found it hard to set boundaries around Isabelle's constant demand for support and help.

After a conversation with HR, Mike had the opportunity to get an external supervisor who helped him to understand and implement more sophisticated coaching skills in the mentor sessions. As a start he re-visited the objectives of the mentor relationship with Isabelle and agreed a clear contract covering frequency, time and content of the mentor meetings. In addition, they agreed that in each meeting they would allow a limited amount of time to acknowledge that they work in a very demanding and highly stressful environment and then move on to potential solutions instead of spending additional time adding more examples of unfair treatment and burnout. Continuing the supervision during the mentoring relationship helped Mike to recognise the stress factors for himself. With this raised self-awareness he could avoid pitfalls and he felt better equipped for his role as mentor – both for Isabelle and other potential mentees in the future.

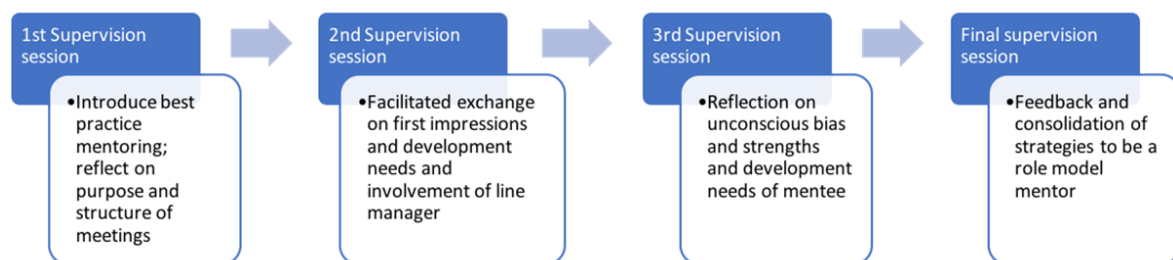
Supervision gives the mentor an opportunity to 'check-in' and provides a safe space to critically reflect on the mentoring process, including:

- The identification of the mentor's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the mentor role
- A reflection on what situations feel easy and which are more challenging for the mentor and why
- The identification of the different stakeholders involved and their expectations
- The clarification on boundaries and limitation of the mentoring relationship including ethical considerations.

Supervision and the knowledge of what needs to be considered for high quality mentor supervision is still not widespread, therefore Figure 3 provides additional suggestions on how supervision can maximise the chances of success of an internally managed mentoring programme.

In addition to bringing professional insights and advice to the discussion, the supervision sessions will inspire different thinking and approaches for the mentor to more effectively support their mentee. Supervisory discussions may be challenging and might push the mentor outside of their comfort zone, however this is for the collective benefit of the mentee and the wider organisation.

Figure 3: Example of best practice mentor supervision



Evaluation of mentor programmes

As with any organisational initiative, a mentor programme needs to be evaluated against the set objectives. Ideally, programmes should be continually evaluated to ensure that they stay on track and deliver the expected benefits; adjustment can be made while the programme is running if the feedback suggests that there is a mismatch between expectation and reality. This can be done by collecting formal and informal feedback, offering a questionnaire or conducting interviews.

As well as continuously improving the programme, the feedback can also be used to provide information to keep the wider stakeholder group informed about the value and return on investment. This can help to keep the senior leadership team involved, enthusiastic and reassured.

Risks of poorly implemented programmes

In the authors' experience, a mentor programme can easily fail when there are not enough resources available to support, structure and monitor the mentors, mentees and the process. A common show-stopper that can influence whether the mentor programme gets off the ground is whether or not senior leaders act as visible and outspoken stakeholders, leading by example and offering themselves as mentors. A poorly implemented mentor programme can discredit the whole idea of mentoring and with one or two bad experiences senior leaders might start to withdraw and not be willing to make themselves available as mentors.

At the same time, the risk of failure is always present when trust between mentor and mentee cannot be established and/or the mentors do not have the skillset, time, interest or motivation to add value to their mentee's development.

Mentors need recognition

Anna, a senior MD in banking was well known for being approachable and supportive to improve gender diversity at senior levels. One day she received a call from a more junior female employee and was asked when she had time for a first mentor meeting – Anna's name had been given to her by the HR team. Anna was frustrated about the call – she didn't know about being on a mentor list and wasn't clear about the expectations of this particular programme. She felt that her professional approach to people development and being a senior female leader and supporter of diversity in general were not the only criteria that should have been considered when putting her forward as a mentor. In addition, she was just about to close a major client deal and then start her maternity leave, so she was annoyed that the HR professionals who made the introduction had not explored the circumstances prior to offering her services. It was no surprise that Anna didn't feel that mentoring was a priority for her at the time and was rather critical about the programme.

As described in this case, a bad experience might trigger the mentor and/or mentee to become cynical about the programme and withdraw support. As mentor programmes are targeted across hierarchies, a failure is usually very visible and might lead to a considerable reputation damage of the HR department who usually own these programmes. This can even spread out to other people development initiatives and trigger potentially a downward spiral for the desired culture of an organisation.

Finally, for a mentor programme to flourish, there are costs associated which need to be considered and calculated for the duration of the programme, and not just for the initial launch and cohort. Being mindful of the costs associated with a best practice programme and being aware of potential risks, the organisation needs to decide in which area the return on investment will be highest. This is why mentor programmes often focus on high potential employees as a priority.

The benefits of mentor programmes

Benefits to the individual

A well designed and managed mentor programme should not only benefit the organisation but also has to benefit the mentor and the mentee to justify the investment of time and effort.

The benefits for the mentees are easily defined – access to a more senior audience of leaders, opportunities for bigger and higher profile roles that could be the 'ticket' to promotion, and also the opportunity to receive open and honest feedback in discussion with an experienced leader (Kirk 2017). As this senior leader/mentor should not be in the mentee's direct reporting line, a safe space for a different level of honesty and insight is offered.

Less talked about, but equally important are the benefits for the mentors (Zikic 2016, Melcher 2014). Next to participating in mentor training which as an outcome should help them to develop coaching skills and techniques, they can also benefit from having the opportunity to hone their coaching skills in a relationship where they are not appraising the more junior employee on their performance. They have the professional distance to coach and give feedback without the potential conflict of interest they might have as a line manager. At the same time the acquired coaching skillset is transferrable to their other roles in the organisation. Or as Farnell (2017) expresses it: "It has made me a more empathic and emotional intelligent leader".

The opportunity to receive supervision also gives them the space to increase self-awareness, emotional intelligence and reflect on their impact and power in their different roles across the organisation. It helps them to become a more credible and authentic leader (Hieker & Rushby, 2017) who inspires peers and more junior employees.

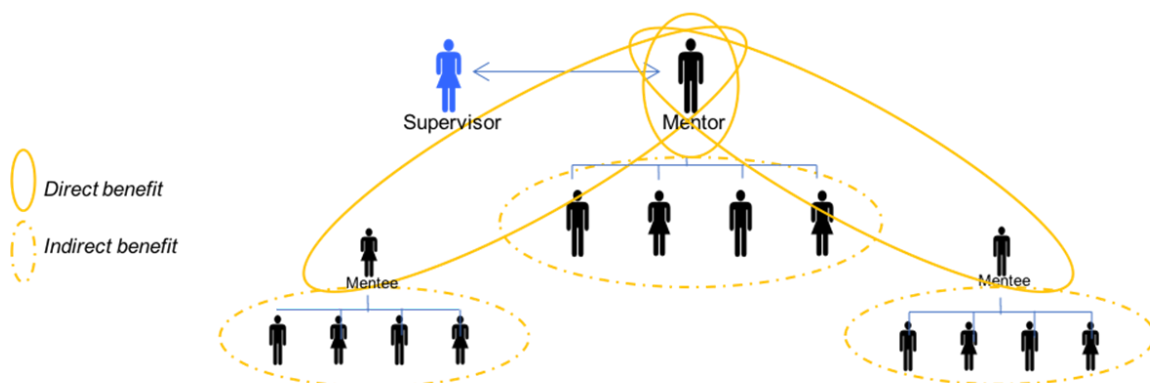
Finally, some organisations offer peer supervision by encouraging mentors to meet and discuss challenges and successes. This offers a great opportunity to enhance one's network and creates a learning environment which benefits both the individual and the organisation.

Benefits to the organisation

The very nature of mentoring means that there is a cascade benefit for the organisation which is different from other development interventions. Being trained as a mentor should positively impact one's coaching skills as a line manager as well. At the same time, with the guidance and input from the mentor, the mentee will perform better and in turn their reportees will have a more positive work experience. Very quickly, the number of people who are impacted by the mentor / mentee relationship increases, which contributes to a better team experience and organisational culture and success. This can be seen in Figure 4.

This cascade effect influences the organisation as a whole by enhancing the quality of the leaders and fostering a culture of development and communication across hierarchies. After one or two successfully implemented mentor programmes, mentees will grow into bigger roles and will become mentors themselves, motivated to 'give back' to the organisation, creating a virtuous cycle.

Figure 4: The cascade benefit of mentoring



Trends in mentor programmes

So far, the main focus of this article has been on traditional mentor relationships where senior leaders support, challenge and develop more junior employees within the same organisation to move on in their career. However, this does not always need to be the case. Two different models of mentoring have also been identified:

Mentoring across organisations

At more senior levels, the traditional mentoring concept is often not appropriate as there might be a limited number of senior leaders who can fulfil the mentor role. However, especially at this stage of a career it is valuable to have a sparring partner/mentor who helps the leader to think 'outside the box' and become more innovative. One option to achieve this is through a professional or personal

network where the mentor is not part of the mentee's organisation. This distance might enable a discussion to be more strategic, which is helpful when inspiring a senior mentee. Also, in this case the senior leader might feel more comfortable in sharing as the mentor is not part of the organisation. Usually an agreement on confidentiality can minimise the risk that sensitive information is shared with other parties.

These cross-organisational activities have been around for many years as the benefits of this exchange can be very rich and rewarding for both parties. However, as the wider implementation of a more formalised programme with another organisation is a complex task and needs many resources to manage, they often are more informally established through the mentee's own network and contacts.

Reverse mentor programmes

A more recently developed trend is 'reversed mentor programs'. Some companies that have realised the impact of the Millennial generation, both the challenge and the opportunity, have set-up a different form of mentoring – reverse mentor programmes. Reverse mentor programmes give the senior leader the opportunity to connect to the Millennial generation not in the mentor role, but as a mentee – mainly with the objective to learn from the 'digital native' generation on artificial intelligence and the handling of social media. The idea is to let the younger, less-experienced employee teach and guide the older more experienced one (Holmes 2018), to the mutual benefit of both individuals. Reverse mentor programmes acknowledge the younger generation as key resource for handling new technology and even leading the change, ensuring that the senior leader is equipped with the knowledge and language to operate in the digital world (Microsoft 2018).

Senior leaders can appreciate being mentored

John, a mid-forty senior executive running a global operation team was delighted about having a junior mentor who worked in the IT department of the company. He met his mentor Jeremy on a regular basis and emphasised that he could finally ask any stupid question and get competent answers without being embarrassed. What did Jeremy get out of this? He thought it was marvellous to spend time with a real 'big fish' and had the opportunity to receive valuable feedback on his communication style and his effective capability of explaining complex tasks in a simple way, a skill which supported Jeremy's progression in his career .

While these programmes are in their infancy, the Millennials are responding well to the recognition and opportunity to have an impact early in their career as well as senior leaders welcome the opportunity to connect with the young generation. Therefore, more organisations will probably adopt reverse mentor programmes over the next few years. However, it is important to realise that the above criteria of good mentor programmes will still be key to success: aligning objectives, managed matching process, training and supervision of mentor and mentees. As in any relationship, mutual respect for each other is fundamental to the success of mentoring and also Millennials need to be trained in active listening, giving feedback appropriately and putting themselves in the shoes of the less technological experienced senior leader.

Conclusion

In this article, the authors have considered the history of talent development in organisations and its impact on the evolution of coaching and mentoring. By reviewing the key features of mentor programmes and in addition considering the elements of best practice mentoring, they are able to highlight what are the key ingredients of both successful and sustainable mentoring programmes.

The positive effect of mentoring is widely recognised in literature (Carter 2010, Chopra 2017, Hewlett et al. 2011), and many different studies prove the benefit for the mentee, mentor and the organisation (Kirk 2017). However, sustainable mentor programmes which survive the usual management cycle of 3-5 years are rarely found. Based on the authors experience one reason is that programmes are often closely linked with the enthusiasm and effort of one or two key stakeholders which might be a senior HR or a business leader. With a change of key stakeholder, the programmes are at risk of waning. The authors also observe that the resources needed to support a sustainable programme are often underestimated, which leads to a big launch initially, but with future cohorts not being exposed to the same attention and recognition. Eventually this 'neglect' causes programmes to slow down, reduce in importance and profile, with the automatic return to informal mentoring for the most eager individuals who take the initiative themselves. One learning the authors hear on an on-going basis from HR professionals is that resources need to be allocated and budgeted over a period of at least 5 years for the 'farming/maintenance' of the mentor programme.

Also, it can be said that all stakeholders involved in mentor programmes from senior leaders and HR Professionals to the mentors and mentees, agree that constant and consistent communication, newsletters, success stories and an active effort to make mentoring a part of the organisations narrative are critical to keep the programme prominent and 'alive'. The main objective must be that mentoring becomes and stays a key component of the desired culture of the organisation.

For future research, the authors recommended that the different aspects of successful of mentor programmes should be explored further. A long-term study in a large organisation with systematic data collection from all stakeholders (e.g. HR professionals, consultants, leaders) and participants (e.g. mentors and mentees) would be desirable. Due to the widely recognised limitation of conducting business research in the field such as confidentiality, and/or limited access to data, internal resources in the organisation need to commit to such a task.

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About the authors

Dr. Carola Hieker started her career as an internal HR professional with PwC before co-founding HIL Coaching, a small consultancy-boutique. She has over 25 years of experience as a Senior Executive Coach and Change Management Consultant in a wide range of industries. Carola is an Honorary Professor of UCL and an Associate Professor of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour at Richmond, The American International University in London, UK.

Maia Rushby is an executive coach with years of business experience complementing her coaching practice. She has lived and worked abroad, giving her deep, practical knowledge into the value and challenges of working across diverse cultures. Her coaching focusses on developing the mind-sets of leaders across a variety of sectors.