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Mentoring: a lost technique

The tactic of mentoring could be a valuable asset for business managers.

Over the years Chemark has written about the attributes and merits of mentoring as a tactic when, properly administered and supported, can provide a great number of positives at the management level in our industry today. This remains true especially in today's economic environment.

In our column in February 2002, Chemark discussed this topic and mentioned several persons in well-respected chemical companies that have been the beneficiaries of the process, and, particularly, several from one company: Goodyear T&R Chemical Division.

Of the 21 mentored members of the Chemical Division class of 1964 the mentoring tactic proved to be extremely successful. For example, Jim Lee became president of Henkel, his brother Bob "Robert E." Lee, vice president of Shell Chemical; Jim Fiedler became executive VP of Goodyear and his brother, Lee Fiedler, president of Kelly-Springfield Tire (a subsidiary of Goodyear).

These people were assisted and molded by mentors at The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company through a simple well-defined process that was sponsored at the chairman's level and nurtured by all management throughout Goodyear. One might observe that several of these people left Goodyear to achieve their ultimate position and Goodyear "lost" the talent they spent resources on in the process.

It is true that some did leave, but they also achieved high-level positions within Goodyear and contributed to the success of the company prior to leaving. Additionally, Chemark determined that Goodyear had one of the highest employee hire retained rates in the industries they served. There are other companies with historic stellar performance in the management ranks credited in part to a strong mentoring program. 3M, Dow and Loctite are just a few.

Some would offer many valid reasons for the demise of the mentoring concept, saying that 20-30 years ago and beyond things were different in the supply chain when compared to what we experience today. They would say that the economy was booming in the 50s through the 80s, when, due to explosive growth, capacity was challenged, and expansion in all major segments was the rule.

With this robust economic backdrop, relative to today's standards, tactical "sloppiness" was also in vogue and accepted simply because the expansion boom would tolerate slack and mediocre, somewhat careless quality, delivery, service and communications. Today, with consolidation, tightening quality and service demands in combination with severe price/margin pressures, something has to go. Mentoring has been one element of management that is sacrificed primarily due to time availability constraints.

Or, the argument that one simply cannot afford mentoring. It is as a luxury that has seen its day and cannot be practically duplicated and used in today's coatings, adhesives and sealants businesses with the demands on perfection at every aspect of doing business, is a common comment.

In considering the middle and upper management attrition rates within our supply chain at over 20% complicated by our industry's lack-luster image versus other more glamorous industries such as E-business, electronics and others, to attract high caliber graduates, we have a problem now and a larger one as we move forward.

Can mentoring shoulder the responsibility of getting and keeping high caliber people? No. Not by itself. But it can bring a company and industry a long way into the process.

In the January 2008 *Harvard Business Review*, "Why Mentoring Matters in a Hypercompetitive World," they develop four principles regarding mentoring:

• ***Principle #1*** Mentoring Is Personal: We are universal in our disdain for "packaged mentorship" instead they want concrete, hands-on feedback from a senior professional who takes a personal interest in their careers. New and senior management demand some degree of predictability, but are willing to work very hard in the process.

• ***Principle #2*** Not Everyone Is an "A" Player: "A" players usually constitute only 20% of the professional staff and "C" players another 10%. Therefore, "B" players make up the remaining 70%— a large group we call the "solid citizens." "B" players are the heart and soul of an organization.

If they are mediocre, the company will be mediocre. "A" players, relatively small number, will never make up for the solid citizens, regardless of how good the "A" players are.

• ***Principle #3*** Choice Assignments Are in Short Supply: When plum assignments are not available, the junior management level can grow frustrated and feel that management is not really interested in their career development. They also don't believe that HR will represent their best interests. That's where the mentor comes in.

• ***Principle #4*** Mentoring Is a Two-Way Street: Not all the responsibility for mentoring rests with upper management. Too many "B" players give up quickly and look for greener pastures rather than learn how to thrive by catching the attention of mentors and management. The Juniors must learn how to professionally attract these assets.

MENTORING OBJECTIVES

The objectives of mentoring are simple. They are:

- To nurture the progressive growth of the employee;
- To increase the employees value to your company;
- To increase the employees company contribution;
- To create a reciprocal loyalty environment;
- To retain the employee for the long-term;
- Prevent employee failure; and
- Identify the total potential of employees

Tactically, a mentor must:

- Broaden the employees company education;
- Anticipate and be responsive to the employees needs;
- Provide flexibility to the employees thinking process;
- Product training and advice; and
- Provide the practical advice on "how to get things done"

The true act of mentoring for success involves everybody. Here are the elements associated with a successful mentoring culture:

- Mentoring IS part of the corporate culture. Its ingrained;
- Therefore, all mentoring personnel are held responsible for their charges;
- Effective mentoring emphasizes pride of the employees' accomplishments;
- A mentor is not a direct line reporting function;
- A mentor is outside the direct reporting functions and with +5 years tenure;
- All business related subjects are "open" for mentoring discussions;
- Mentoring requires time and patience for success; and
- Mentoring must be set in an environment with a long-term view, not a short-term "survival" mode.

Your personnel are the most precious assets you possess as a manager. Nurture them! ***CW***

See Chemark's ad this month on page 59.