

How to Design an Employee Mentorship Program That Doesn't Suck



Whether you've worked in the industry for 25 years or two years, it can be difficult to navigate the complexities of a career. This includes figuring out the internal politics, processes, and opportunities that drive growth within a company and the small steps and education that lead to defining the different stages of a person's professional career.

Making decisions about both of these paths benefit from having a mentor: someone who can be a guide, a motivator, and an advocate. And it's a smart investment for companies to make: According to a [study by Jerry Wilbur](#), mentoring is a **significant predictor of career success**. Mentees earn more money and experience more satisfaction in their work.

Yet, few agencies consider the impact or invest resources in mentorship programs that can increase employee motivation, happiness, and most importantly, retention. Attrition in agencies is especially problematic. According to a recent study by the [4A's and LinkedIn](#), the rate of turnover at agencies increased 10% compared to competitive industries. The report also found that 54% of agency employees left because they were concerned about the opportunities for advancement in their current position.

Creating a Mentorship Program

A clear career path is important but also is the idea that the company you are working for is invested in your professional growth and development. It was this core concept that

spurred MEC, a global media agency with around 650 employees in the U.S., to launch a formal mentorship program in March.

“Everything we do is to make sure that our employees feel engaged and rewarded and motivated to stay -- our intention and our purpose is in keeping great people as long as we can keep them,” said Kristen Metzger, who is the managing partner of people and culture at MEC.

MEC faces a competitive marketplace like so many in the industry, and Metzger believes that those agencies that offer better guidance around long-term goal planning and foster stronger relationships between team members are in a better position to attract and retain talent. If an employee leaves because he says he didn't know what his career path at the company looked like, then that's “shame on us,” she said.

In addition, mentorship programs help solve a few common employee frustrations:

Give employees a feedback loop outside of the traditional routes.

There are some questions you want to ask but that just would make for an awkward encounter with your manager. This is typically more important for new hires; however, navigating the internal politics, culture, traditions, and relationships in a new company can be the most complex part of adjusting to and succeeding in a new role. When you have a mentor who is removed from judging your performance, it makes it easier to ask those questions, vent about small things, and open up about fears, worries, and the inevitable stumbles.

Reveal a different side of the company.

Retaining top talent requires some creativity when it comes to growth. Some individuals are happy to stay in the same position for five or more years, while others want movement and new challenges to remain happy. By pairing a person up with someone from another department or team, you are exposing the employee to new knowledge about the way the business is run, people with different ideas and perspectives about the industry, and new opportunities. This is especially important for people who may love the company but have found out that they are just not passionate about their current position.

Increase motivation and performance.

A Society for Human Resource Management survey of managers found that only 2% were providing quarterly or ongoing feedback to employees. People crave feedback, and they need it more than once or twice a year. They want recognition of their efforts and advice on how to improve. And a mentor can provide some of that missing validation and guidance when someone is craving more interactions with peers or people they see an

experts. Mentors can provide that push to employees to not only perform better in their current positions but to also take on learning something new, pursuing a side project, or getting involved in industry events.

How to Implement a Mentorship Program That Actually Works

Mentorship is a vague term, which hasn't helped to improve its credibility. But when done right -- when it's something people actually want to participate in and are given the tools to do so in an effective way -- a mentor-mentee matchup can provide huge dividends to the people involved in the program and the company as a whole.

MEC's program, which has 88 participants, followed these tenets when launching its program:

1) Match people by interests or what they want to achieve.

Metzger and her team started by sending out a survey to employees to vet who was interested in being a mentor and who would like to be a mentee. Many people had asked for a formal program like this, but they needed to better understand what specifically employees would find valuable and useful. The survey included a list of 15 possible topics people would like to engage with a mentor or mentee on -- from digital fluency to career development to conflict resolution to work-life balance to mobile media.

She wanted people to see the mentorship program as a learning opportunity and a way for people to gain experiences outside of their departments.

Ildi Conrad, the director of learning at MEC, said there were three key themes that emerged from the survey results: 1) People want general guidance on career development and to network with other people in the company. 2) Employees, especially junior-level employees, want to learn more about the media industry, the various jobs available, and the career opportunities they should consider. 3) People want to gain knowledge about a specific area of the business or learn a new skill that would benefit their career.

The survey also asked people to detail what they would like to get out of the program and the qualities they would like to see in a mentor.

“We matched them on a personal basis,” Metzger said. “We literally sat with all of the results of the surveys and paired people together who were like-minded, had similar interests, and wanted similar things out of the relationship.”

While there are automated ways to do this type of matching, Metzger felt that it was important to hand-select the pairs to create the best matchups.

For example: One junior-level female mentee wanted career development advice and was looking to be matched with someone with broader business experience. Metzger's team paired her with a senior female leader who manages one of the agency's largest accounts and previously spent time on the client side. Metzger said they've spent a lot of time talking about the different opportunities in the media industry and the career paths available, empowering the mentee to take ownership of her career journey.

2) Don't force it, but make it serious.

MEC didn't make the mentorship program a mandatory activity for employees, but it did require that mentors and mentees make a serious commitment to the relationship. All pairs signed a "contract" that stated they would make the program a priority and honor their commitments to one another.

Metzger has heard of only one pair who faced challenges meeting frequently and has connected with them to determine how the two would like to proceed with the relationship. The key is to not to force something on people if things aren't working -- they need to decide together if the pace is manageable and address changes that need to be made to make the meetings valuable. Either way, it must be their decision, she said.

3) Empower the mentee to take charge.

At MEC, the mentee is responsible for setting the time and date of the meetings. And they gave each mentee a Starbucks coffee card so they could be seen as the one "taking out" their mentor, providing a cup of coffee for a valuable advice and conversation.

"We want the mentee to feel empowered and to make sure that they understand that they also own the relationship," said Metzger. "We wanted to make sure that the mentee, who was really leaning in and asking for this, was equally if not more responsible for making sure that it happens."

The card also encourages pairs to get out of the office where they can have less formal and more private conversations.

4) Create structure, but not too much.

For a mentorship program to work, it needs to be flexible enough to evolve with the relationship, but it also needs some boundaries and requirements to maintain momentum.

In the contract mentorship pairs signed, it provides a simple framework: Pairs should meet once per month for a year. Already stated was the encouragement to meet off-site, and the survey helped people to pre-determine what they wanted to learn from the meetings.

In addition, the people and culture team sends a monthly email newsletter to participants, highlighting news, articles, and resources that can spark conversations for their one-on-one conversations and encourage personal growth. For example, an initial email highlighted the importance of goal setting specific to the mentoring relationship, while another provided guidance on asking open-ended questions that would spark productive conversations.

5) Allow opportunities for reverse mentoring.

“I think it's important to note that the mentor mentee relationship is not necessarily senior versus junior,” Metzger said.

For some, the launch of the mentorship program was a way to learn something new from someone who is on the “front lines.”

Marla Kaplowitz, CEO of MEC North America, applied for the mentorship program stating that she “wanted to connect with today’s tech-savvy generation to better understand how they are truly using and connecting with new and emerging tools and technology.” She joked that her mentor would have to be open to “teaching an old dog some new tricks.”

Kaplowitz was paired with a director on the activation team and the reverse mentoring matchup has been beneficial for both partners involved. It shows there are opportunities for employees to engage with and share knowledge not just across teams or from the top of the corporate ladder.

While Kaplowitz’s involvement was purely voluntary, it is a good idea to get senior leadership involved in any type of formal program. It shows the team that this is a priority for the agency and that there should be no end to learning and professional development for employees.

Retaining the Best

Creating a mentorship program is an investment in the future of your team members. You’re giving them the opportunity to better understand what they want for their career, to see your company through the perspective of someone either more senior or junior, and the chance to improve their understanding of the industry and develop additional skills.

It’s about creating new personal connections that can go a long way when your top performers are considering what their next career step looks like and if it includes continuing to contribute to your agency’s success.