

mentoring your potential successor

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One piece of advice that may be passed along to you when you first become a manager is the axiom, "if you want to get promoted, then you have to train your replacement." Sounds easy, doesn't it? But the road to developing a team member for potential promotion is not an easy one. In this column, we'll describe how you can start off on the right foot by succeeding as a mentor.

Wouldn't it be great if the personnel department could administer a test on interview day that scientifically forecasts an interviewee's potential to take your place? In the real world, you are left with making the choice yourself. Sometimes your decision can be made solely on emotional reasoning. At other times, you may have to devise a competition that sends a clear message to the competitors. Either situation can be bad news for morale and leadership issues within your company.



THE MENTOR-PROTEGÉ RELATIONSHIP.

One of the best ways to help a person fulfill his or her potential in your organization is through the mentoring process. Most graduate students understand the importance of this special relationship, but did you know that mentoring can be just as critical in a Biotechnology company? With such rapid growth, it is vital to disseminate the wealth of knowledge that can sometimes sit in little pockets of the company. I find it puzzling that the most seasoned employees at many well-established companies (people who really know how to get things done in science or business) will often be the ones who refuse to share their knowledge and nurture the talents of those under them.

Some supervisors do little to spread their knowledge through the ranks because they mistakenly believe that holding on to knowledge represents a sort of power. Have you ever worked in a company where the only information you received was disseminated through rumors? There are few things as depressing, particularly for creative and highly technical employees, as the drifting sensation created when a supervisor decides to withhold information. Some new supervisors believe that sharing knowledge is a weakness. Although it is true that knowledge is power, those who do not pass it on and plan for their replacement may find themselves on a career plateau.

One other concern, usually heard from the weakest supervisors, is that it is possible to shoot yourself in the foot by training and mentoring someone who can end up being your boss. My feeling is that you need to look past this possibility and see the positive reasons why your team should be developed. The greatest compliment that can be paid a manager is for those who were trained under him or her to succeed in the company.

SELECTING A PROTEGÉ.

To move up another rung on your corporate ladder, you'll want to identify your potential successor. Here are some thoughts about the profile you might look for when choosing this key person:

Time investment. First, it can take a year or more for an employee to be comfortable with the culture of a company. Choosing a protégé who hasn't had this exposure could result in early disappointment for both parties.

Performance. Identify an employee with a track record of consistent high performance combined with demonstrated technical or managerial competence.

Motivation. Search for those who demonstrate a willingness to learn (and who consider lifelong learning a goal). You'll also need a person who can take direction from others.

Team building. Finally, a person who fosters a team atmosphere may be a wiser choice than the obvious self-promoter.

Because problems can develop with this relationship, it is always better to move gently into a mentoring situation rather than to announce that a team member has been selected for future promotion. It may be wise to go a step further and refrain from referring to it as a mentor-protégé relationship. Instead, ask this person whether he or she would like to work more closely with you and begin from there.

COUNTERING RESENTMENT.

One major problem that supervisors encounter when they begin to work closely with a potential successor is that other team members begin to resent the relationship. This can quickly deteriorate into interpersonal problems for you or the protégé, and the entire team can demoralize quickly.

When setting up a mentor relationship, keep it discrete and low-key. It is not something to announce publicly or to make a great show of among the team. This does not mean that you have to conduct your sessions during off-hours; it just means that you do not formalize the relationship. You can choose several people in your team to develop, depending on the time that is available. Some managers meet with good prospects regularly in group meetings.

PREVENTING THE "CROWN PRINCE/PRINCESS SYNDROME."

Another problem can develop when a team member becomes known as "the chosen one" throughout the organization. This is referred to by management trainers as the "Crown Prince/Princess Syndrome." Not only does this create resentment that detracts from the overall performance of your team, but it can start to affect your selected replacement who begins to take it to heart that he/she is going to land in your job. Suddenly, a great team member can start underperforming in grand style.

A great deal of this may have to do with how formally you announced this relationship to the team. Again, keep up the low-key approach. Some protégés will assume that they are the chosen one. To avoid this, always make certain that you begin the relationship with the clear understanding that your future support will be determined by their continued high performance.

BE A MENTOR AND ADVANCE YOUR OWN CAREER.

Those who have definite career plans know the possibilities available to them – both inside and outside the company. These proactive few recognize that in order to make progress up the career ladder, they must continually nurture the personal development of those who report to them. If you are not actively engaged in this effort, you may be shortchanging your future and the futures of those who are counting on your help.

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