

# Corporate Mentoring Programs: Increasing Your Diversity Advantage

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The workforce talent landscape is changing. How companies manage through this change will be a key to their ultimate success. Managing diversity within the workforce, including the current reality of four generations working together side by side, is a top concern of corporate executives. The newest generation of talent brings amazing technological proficiency with them, more than any other generation before them. On the other end of the spectrum, the retiring workforce may be creating an unexpected “brain drain” as incredible amounts of experience and knowledge begin walking out the door.

Mentoring programs are increasingly being recognized as the perfect marriage between these two generations, as the sharing of knowledge by your most senior staff with your creatively charged junior staff may just inspire bouts of innovation that could secure your enterprise’s future success. Don Tapscott describes this new world of collaboration in *The New York Times* bestseller *Wikinomics*, along four principles—openness, peering, sharing, and acting globally—as opposed to the hierarchical, closed, secretive, and insular multinationals that dominated the previous century.

Although the war for talent will continue to be a never-ending search for the best of the best in these changing times, the myth is that the entire search is an external one. To the contrary, developing the talent that exists internally can be incredibly rewarding not only for the personal and professional growth of the individuals participating, but can be an invaluable competitive advantage for companies given today’s environment.

Corporate mentoring programs that work are perceived as positive experiences for both mentor and mentee and must contain a high level of trust and commitment on the part of participants and generate successful outcomes, such as increased productivity and career advancement. Successful corporate mentoring programs share common features, including leadership buy-in, clear expectations and a built-in process for setting goals and evaluating success.

Ted Childs, principal of Ted Childs LLC, the company he founded after a distinguished 39-year career with IBM, most recently as its Vice President of Global Workforce Diversity, believes that corporate mentoring programs are extremely important tools corporations should use to enrich or maximize their talent. Childs, himself a product of mentoring, credits mentoring relationships he had early in his career with helping to make him an effective executive at IBM.

Childs considers mentoring essential to the execution of a successful diversity program; he says, “I think that some years down the road, we are going to look back and see that mentoring was the most effective talent development initiative that we participated in.” He believes, however, these programs should not be geared toward a specific group. “People from every group [of society] have benefited from mentoring and I believe everyone should have access.”

Childs also adds, “Mentoring programs should be penalty-free, personalized relationships between the mentor and mentee,” meaning that if it turns out mentor and mentee are a bad match, one or the other can end the mentoring relationship without fear of repercussions.

Company-sponsored mentoring programs should be tailored to the specialized needs of diverse employees and should address specific needs within an organization and offer opportunities for both the mentor and mentee to grow. Dr. Belle Rose Ragins, esteemed professor and co-author of *Mentoring and Diversity: An International Perspective*, explained that people who have access to mentors enjoyed greater satisfaction in their work and career. According to Dr. Ragins, “While it’s important for everyone, it’s even more important for people from non-dominant groups who face barriers to advancement.”

Larry Ambrose, managing partner of Perrone-Ambrose Associates, Inc. and author of *A Mentor’s Companion*, says a mentoring program with diversity as its base will help mentees in

the program be ready for success and will help them gain the knowledge needed to grow personally and advance professionally. He says companies that have mentoring programs geared toward a minority audience with clear goals, purposes, and objectives bring lasting value by adding to the number of highly qualified minority employees and facilitating their advancement within the company. However, the diversity office also needs to be aware of differences between mentoring minorities and cross-race mentoring.

David Thomas, Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, conducted a pivotal study in this area that revealed minorities should be mentored very differently than their white counterparts. His research found that minorities who advanced the furthest in the corporate pipeline all shared one characteristic—a strong network of mentors and corporate sponsors who nurtured their professional development.

Thomas's research reveals that some of the factors that define a successful mentoring relationship include the fact that both the mentor and mentee perceive the experience as successful and that the experience involves actions and attitudes designed to help the mentee advance and build trust. Some of the factors that contribute to an unsuccessful mentoring relationship include lack of respect for both parties, lack of clarity or consensus regarding the goals of the mentoring relationship, no commitment on the part of the mentor or if the mentor is unwilling to commit the time and energy necessary to establish and maintain the relationship.

Thomas also found that the mentor of a “professional of color” must also be aware of the challenges race can present to his or her mentee's career development and advancement. Only then can the mentor help senior managers reduce and reject workplace bias and assist mentees in building a network of relationships with people who can pave the way to the executive level.

Whether your mentoring program is informal, formal or virtual, mentoring creates an environment that allows employees to grow and flourish. Specifically, as it relates to diverse and women employees, mentoring can advance the Diversity Office's goal of creating inclusive environments and advancement opportunities. Most importantly, mentoring programs should be offered to all employees, which allows those who have advanced knowledge in the organization the opportunity to interact and share their experiences with the company's future leaders.

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