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Mentors: Helping Younger Managers up the Hospitality Ladder

Abstract

Mentoring is a centuries-old concept. However, in the hospitality industry, with its fast pace and high pressures, mentors can be of benefit in the training of younger managers before burnout. The author discusses both the problems and benefits of mentoring, and how the system can work in the industry.

Keywords

Howard Adler, Management training, Burnout, Education, Mentoring

Mentors: Helping Younger Managers Up The Hospitality Ladder

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Mentoring is a centuries-old concept. However, in the hospitality industry, with its fast pace and high pressures, mentors can be of benefit in the training of younger managers before burnout. The author discusses both the problems and benefits of mentoring, and how the system can work in the industry.

The hospitality industry has an insatiable appetite for highly competent, well-trained managers. The development of large chains in some segments of the industry, including the hotel/motel and fast food areas, continues to create more management positions. Mom-and-pop operations, increasingly hard-pressed by the expanding competition, often reach outside the family for professional management. Despite a slowed economy, Americans are eating a growing number of meals away from home, and travel for both business and pleasure is beginning to accelerate.

To meet the increasing need for managers, the number of four-year colleges offering programs in hotel and restaurant administration has grown from fewer than 25 in the early '60s to over 100 today. The number of graduates has multiplied from fewer than 1,000 per year to an estimated 5,000 this year.

A growing supply of graduates hasn't solved the hospitality industry's problems, however. Instead of spending years learning the business as they work their way up through the ranks, new trainees start out in accelerated training programs. Many hospitality companies put young people on the fast track, and if they don't perform well immediately, they are soon cut from the team. This type of industry practice leads to a high rate of burnout among young managers. Many simply give up and leave. With the right nurturing, some might have become excellent managers.

Young Managers Have Problems

Many graduates enter training programs with unrealistically high expectations concerning career advancement. They believe their college degrees have adequately prepared them to immediately assume positions of authority; they don't know how much they don't know. While college and university hospitality management programs give students a good foundation to build upon, they often don't instruct stu-

dents how to take a leadership role. Younger managers often find it hard to filter important duties from the unimportant, and get bogged down in inappropriate tasks.

In addition, younger managers may pick up signals from those around them that say, "If you're not constantly moving up to higher and higher positions, you're not doing a good job." To the new graduate, patience is definitely not a virtue. Disillusionment and frustration soon set in.

While many of these new recruits have had hospitality industry experience, few have much experience at being on their own. In going from the college environment to a first position, they have the usual transitions: establishing a home and new relationships, managing money, etc. They have no one to confide in or discuss personal or work-related problems with; for the first time, they may be completely alone. The sense of isolation may be intensified by training programs requiring several quick moves to new communities.

Mentors Can Assist In The First Step

As young men and women take their first steps into an adult world, they need nurturing in order to develop their potential. One of the best ways to help them grow in positive directions is mentoring. Successful people have known about mentors for centuries. The apprentice system in which younger, inexperienced workers affiliate themselves with established craftsmen has been around since the Middle Ages. From childhood, many people consciously or unconsciously build informal mentor relationships with a teacher or coach who helps them develop the requisite skills for success.

As young people begin to think about launching careers, forming mentor relationships can help them develop the needed tools. A recent survey suggested that two-thirds of people promoted into the senior ranks of U.S. companies had a mentor to help them, and one-third of those people had two or more mentors. Those executives who had mentors said they found greater satisfaction in their work and earned more money at a younger age than those who didn't have mentors. In some organizations, mentor systems have existed as an invisible part of the chain of command; many industries have openly encouraged mentoring.

A mentor is a very special person in an individual's career and personal development. Mentors take their proteges under their wings and invite them into a new occupational world where they show them around, impart wisdom, act as sponsor, and criticize in a constructive manner. A mentor can help control the "luck" variable in the success equation. Mentors put in a good word for their proteges, tell them about new opportunities, and encourage them to aim for goals that seem out of reach. They are extremely influential people in the lives of their proteges because they help them reach their major goals in life. They often have the power, through who or what they know, to promote the younger person's welfare, training, and career.

Put another way, mentors are career coaches, people who take a special interest in the careers of their proteges. They help with advice on

career advancement strategies, and technical as well as social and managerial skills. Mentors can help young managers get the exposure and visibility they need in addition to counseling them on personal and career-related problems.

Mentors usually choose the protege, but young people can help make success happen by scouting for the right persons to be their mentors. People with ambition have often found "godfathers" willing to offer advice on how to get organized, how to get things done, and, most importantly, how to avoid pitfalls which may undercut a promising career. Younger managers with the potential to make it to the top often lack an understanding of what they must do to get there. By seeking out an older, senior manager who knows the ropes and understands the complexities of the organization, young managers can make an easier transition and have many doors opened for them. Timing is crucial, as are personality, compatibility, and enthusiasm. Of course, mentors should be familiar with the proteges' work and able to evaluate their potential as well as advance their careers. Finding and making use of the right mentor could very well be one of the most critical career steps a person takes.

Of those executives who had mentors, nearly seven out of 10 had a first mentor during the first five years of their careers. Most executives view the first 15 years as the most important learning and growing period; by the age of 40 most managers are realizing or approaching their career goals, and need for a mentor is diminished. By that stage, few people qualify as a mentor for a high-level executive. But no matter what career level a person is going through, a wide variety of mentor relationships exist.

Types of Relationships Vary

According to Linda Philips-Jones at the American Institute for Research at Palo Alto, California, mentors usually fall into five categories. Traditional mentors are usually older bosses who play a supportive role. The protege typically begins with this person as a student, research assistant, trainee, or aide. The mentor protects the protege and fights his or her battles for quite a long time.

The second category—the most common—is that of a supportive boss. This person is often the immediate superior, but the role may be played by anyone in a direct position of authority such as a coach, director, or teacher. Supportive bosses serve more as coaches than long-term protectors.

Organization sponsors are another category. They are people who have reached a high position and are well-connected within the industry, and have taken a liking to a particular young person, deciding to help advance his or her career. They have a major say in whether their proteges will be among those promoted. They are invaluable to young managers because they can say things about their proteges which their proteges could not say for themselves.

Still another category of mentors is patrons who use their money and standing in the community to help young people launch their careers, perhaps financing or supporting them at some point.

Finally, professional mentors can be hired to help advance a career

much as an agent helps an actor. Examples are certified career counselors and psychologists.

In addition to the five categories, there are also peers, friends, neighbors, and other acquaintances who often help individuals move toward career goals by simply listening and helping to generate ideas. We are all surrounded by people who are potential mentors, and should take advantage of opportunities to utilize their expertise, guidance, and encouragement.

Mentors Must Share

A prospective mentor must be a person who is willing to share knowledge and understanding, a secure person who is willing to take risks in helping another person grow. Mentors are usually older than their proteges; however, they can be close in age but at a higher career level. The key is that the mentor has skills, knowledge, or power the protege needs but doesn't have.

Mentor relationships don't have to be close; they may be quite formal and distant. The people involved don't necessarily have to work for the same company; a teacher or professor may serve as a mentor. Although a mentor is usually someone in a superior position, an older person on the same level can be a mentor. Choosing a mentor several levels higher can cause problems. The protege's immediate supervisor may feel the young person is going over his or her head.

The length of time the relationship lasts may vary from a few months to a few years; it can last a lifetime when the protege greatly respects the mentor and continues to ask for advice throughout life.

Most mentoring relationships go through some predictable cycles, according to Katherine Kram, a Boston University researcher. In the first stage, initiation, mentors bask in the satisfaction of being sought out for advice and patronage, while proteges feel flattered that a senior person is spending time with them. The protege often develops a strong admiration for the mentor; the mentor sees the protege as a means to transmit his or her values and perspectives.

Cultivation is the second phase. The relationship moves from a one-way, helping arrangement to one of mutual aid, with the younger manager often acting as an agent for the mentor. This is the period of greatest stability and mutual satisfaction.

The third phase can be thought of as separation, as the younger manager outgrows the need for a mentor. The relationship is no longer responsive to the needs of one or both. After separation, both people struggle to construct a new relationship. It can blossom on a new level of maturity into a lengthy friendship, or become bitter and exasperating.

Dangers Exist in Mentoring

Inherent dangers exist in the mentoring process. There can be abuse and misuse, with damaging effects on everyone involved. Competition may spring up between mentors who are supporting different candidates for a position or promotion. Mentors may use the relationship to demonstrate personal power, and the protege may become a political pawn.

Proteges must keep in mind that their mentors will not always be looking out for them. Mentors will look out for themselves first, and the company second; the protege may well be third on the list. The mentor's enemies may become the protege's enemies because the two are considered a team. If the mentor is transferred or leaves the company, the protege may then be very vulnerable. Therefore, it is easy to see how choosing the wrong mentor can hurt a young person's career as much as the right mentor can advance it.

A common problem is time; the already busy manager may not have time to take on the responsibility for another person's career. Other problems may include the jealousy and resentment of other employees. This danger is even greater when a mentoring relationship develops between a man and a woman; others in the company often mistake the nature of the relationship for a strictly personal one, and rumors abound.

There is always the risk that mentors will become so personally involved with their proteges, that they will be influenced more by emotion than by fact. In addition, young managers may become over-dependent on their mentors to the point where they never develop any real management skills.

While many of these problems could be avoided by setting guidelines and limits in advance, the informal way mentoring relationships develop may make formal guidelines unworkable. Each person must be alert to the dangers of mentoring, and ready to act quickly to solve problems as they arise.

Mentors used to be very common in the hospitality industry. Young people who had the potential to be managers spent years working their way up the ladder, often with the guidance of an established manager who himself had spent years learning all aspects of the field. In a recent survey of hospitality organizations, only a few claimed to have any method to encourage mentoring. Some support a buddy system, but this approach leaves much to chance.

Mentoring Is Difficult in Industry

Mentor relationships have been difficult to establish in the hospitality industry for many reasons:

- Younger hospitality managers are reluctant to admit flaws, weaknesses, or gaps in their knowledge. College-trained managers are often led to believe education and training alone give them the necessary tools for success, and fear developing a dependency on another person will be viewed as a weakness rather than a learning experience.
- Corporate policies move trainees and young managers around so often that the establishment of mentoring relationships at each stop becomes almost impossible.
- Fast-track promotion policies move young managers up so quickly that they are concerned primarily with their own careers. As they continue to move up within the organization, they have neither the time nor the inclination to become a mentor, and often lack the necessary in-depth background. They may be afraid to take re-

sponsibility for a novice, believing the success or failure of their proteges will negatively affect their own careers.

- Lack of loyalty to their organizations causes many managers to resist giving up personal secrets and information that might help others.
- Until recently, there have been few successful women to act as mentors for the many young women entering the industry.

Mentoring Has Benefits

Lack of knowledge about mentoring has inhibited its growth. In a survey of over 500 restaurant, hotel, and institutional management majors at Purdue University, over 50 percent had no idea what a mentor is, although a third of those said someone in the past had helped them in a meaningful way. Colleges and universities must offer information on the mentoring process, including the many benefits that would accrue to all involved. Benefits to the protege would include:

- Beginners can learn what pitfalls to watch for from people who have been there, learning from their mistakes and filing this away as valuable information for the future.
- The aspiring manager can learn about real organizational priorities and goals, and about the formal and informal channels of communication.
- The protege becomes more attuned to the needs of the organization, and thus more productive.
- If the mentor is well-regarded within the company, his or her stamp of approval on the protege will influence others in a positive manner.
- People who have mentors early in their careers will be more able to help other young people in the future by becoming mentors themselves.

Benefits to those who act as mentors include:

- A person who is a mentor can take a great deal of satisfaction in the protege's success and growth, and in molding a talented young person and bringing him or her more fully into the organization.
- A manager's commitment to long-term corporate needs often increases when acting as a mentor to young, upcoming managers.
- Being recommended as a mentor is recognition of the senior person's talent and capability to teach others.

Organization Benefits As Well

The organization benefits in many ways as well:

- The organization's work force will be better trained; few elements will be left to chance.
- Mentors serve the company as trainers, not just for a specific task, but for the development of the people involved. The whole person grows and is better prepared to serve the organization.
- Morale can improve due to the personal involvement and resulting team effort.

- The selection process is improved by which employees are advanced or transferred in the company since the mentors are well acquainted with the strength and weaknesses of younger managers.

The hospitality industry can be an extremely fast-paced, high-pressure profession; that is quickly evident to young people right out of college or trying to work their way up the ladder. Occasionally what is needed is some encouragement, some friendly advice, or just a little blocking. An experienced manager can provide this and at the same time offer friendship.

Trust is an important element between mentor and protege; personal information gained in a mentor relationship must be kept confidential. For this reason, mentoring is often developed and maintained on an informal basis, rather than the more structured approach found in other industries.

Encouraging such relationships can be done by simply informing potential mentors and proteges of the benefits of mentoring. Or it can be prompted by a tightly-structured system such as actually matching proteges to suitable mentors. The company involved must seriously consider which system is most attuned to the needs and personalities of its people.

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