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DIARY OF AN HR PRO: Making Mentoring Memorable

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I have been fortunate to have quite a few memorable mentors throughout my career so far. They helped me through many a crisis, guided me and helped make me the professional that I am today. I thought it might be useful to share some personal experiences interspersed with academic learning's on mentoring and making a success of it.

My first job was that of a Management Trainee in the Industrial Relations (IR) function, on the shop floor of what was then a leading petrochemical company. Straight out of campus, I was honestly, quite lost on day one. The HR manager introduced me to the plant Technical Head, Sujit Mane and said he is your mentor.

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During a three-hour conversation, Mr Mane told me about the plant, technical process, key people, problems, personal experiences of how he survived many a crisis and suggested that I use the one-week plant familiarization program to observe workers in the canteen closely and strike a bond with them. I reported to the plant IR Manager and not to Mr Mane. One learning straight off the bat was that the Mentor must be from another function - not your reporting boss- and someone in a position of influence who can help when needed.

Mr Mane asked me to observe workers when they had the first morsel of food in the general shift. It was a sure shot way of knowing whether they liked the food or not. A lot of worker problems started with the quality of food. A content worker is an asset. With time, I saw that some workers always smiled while others looked perpetually stressed. The time spent in the canteen helped me get a quick insight into a worker's mind. I introduced myself as a trainee and asked them for their views on how to deal with various real time situations. This broke the ice and helped me build a rapport.

At our next meeting, Mr Mane laid out the broad contours of how the mentor-protégé relationship would work. Objectives mutually agreed were of understanding the organization's culture, meeting short-term goals, my development, feedback and finding solutions. He started by telling me his own experiences as a trainee, the mistakes he made and how he learnt things the hard way. By sharing his vulnerability, he subconsciously built a bond. He repeatedly asked me for feedback and was ever willing to hear me out. Through the next few hours, Mr Mane made me feel that I could trust him implicitly.

During the next one year, Mr Mane's guidance ensured that I got excellent exposure to both, the macro and micro aspects of the factory's operations. Every time I shared details of mistakes made, he would never reprimand me, but made me reflect on my actions, think of possible solutions and suggest the option he would have chosen and why. This way mistakes did not dent my confidence but learning from Mr Mane's solutions enhanced my self-esteem.

With time, I began to anticipate problems. We first discussed the issue threadbare, analyzed solutions and agreed on the best way forward. Mr Mane always ended the discussions by saying that by virtue of being the person on the spot, I was the best person to choose from available solutions.

Mr Mane had a great impact on me in my formative years as a professional and on overall growth. He was always "the go to" person whenever I had to discuss something official or personal, that I probably could not openly speak about with anyone else. He respected the process too and always made time to lend me his ear and help.

Now let us look at the concept of Mentoring from an academic perspective.

What is Mentoring? It is most often defined as a professional relationship in which an expert, the mentor, who has huge experience and wisdom assists a growth oriented novice, the protégé/mentee, in developing specific skills and knowledge that will contribute to the mentee's professional and personal growth.

Structured mentoring programs help in many ways -

- Guide new employees find their bearings in the organization that eventually results in talent retention and

lower turnover cost.

- Gives senior management an opportunity to nurture employees and showcase leadership skills.
- As one grows in age, sharing experiences can be a therapeutic experience.
- Given the pace of change in the external environment, it becomes a vehicle for senior management to know how the younger generation thinks and works.
- It is a means to preserve institutional memory.
- Inculcates a culture of sharing knowledge and insights within the organization.
- A mentor can use the program to get knowledge about other parts of the organization.
- It can also be used as a tool to effect changes in organization culture.
- Elevating knowledge transfer from just getting information and to retaining the practical experience and wisdom gained from long-term employees.
- Enhancing professional & personal development of employees.

### **Who will be the mentors?**

Period of mentoring: 1 - 2 years. There is no hard rule about the duration as the mentor - mentee relationship will be one based on trust and confidentiality, which only fosters the process of mentoring.

My first mentor, Mr Mane continues to be my mentor even though both of us do not work for the same organization anymore. He has become my guide for life.

Mentor mentee ratio: Each mentor can have a minimum of two and maximum of five mentees depending on the time he/she can spare, more importantly quality time.

Mentors should undergo some formal learning on the process of mentoring. This would supplement what mentors already know and make the program structured. It would help if a special training program is organized for mentors after the list of mentors and mentees is finalized.

A formal mentoring program in an organization should always be measured and monitored. The measure of development of the mentee to be formally agreed upon by the pair and the Head of Department informed who would monitor progress on a quarterly basis.

With time, I moved into a start-up that was one of the five business units in a large multinational corporation. I faced many challenges, one of which was multiple reporting within and outside the country. Senior Management probably realized the job complexity and interpersonal dynamics, so appointed a very senior HR professional, Sam Ghosh, as my Mentor.

The first meeting with Mr. Ghosh was tough yet memorable. For four hours, he quizzed me on just about every topic under the sun. My interviews for the same job were easier in comparison. As he jokingly told me later, I grilled you to understand the type of person you are and know the level of professional experience/knowledge as well.

Mr Ghosh was my anchor in the vast new organization where I headed HR for a big captive business in India. I was part of a matrix structure globally with three bosses in different continents.

He took me under his wings and helped me understand the structure, people, processes and business demands since he had worked with the Group for over 15 years. Mr Ghosh made me realize the importance of forging partnerships in groups as large as ours. His efforts shortened the learning curve and made me add value to the job within months of joining.

More importantly, he shared small snippets about interpersonal play between senior management (critical at senior levels) that went a long way in helping me meet the conflicting demands of three seniors.

By virtue of being from a different business yet being part of the same group, he took a distant but organizational view to the various challenges that I faced from time to time. His unique perspective helped me come out with innovative solutions that fell within Group Policy, hence got wider and quicker acceptance.

All along he asked me to closely observe how others responded, actually what was not being said, so that I could customize the HR solution.

Mr Ghosh paid me a compliment by saying, 'Aparna you have the knack of getting the best of your mentor i. e. me'. I humbly thanked him for his kind words and said that his ability to dispassionately listen encouraged me to raise issues with him.

In a lighter moment, he told me that his daughter was nearly as old as me, how our interactions made him understand his daughter better. By inviting me for his annual Ganapati puja, Mr Ghosh made me a part of his family. I felt closer to him and his family, a feeling that I cherish even today although we do not work for the same group any more.

A good mentor continues to guide a protege even when they no longer work for the same company or live in different continents. Mr Ghosh's amiable nature allows me to consult him even now on professional challenges years after we worked together.

What I have learnt from my two mentors, Mr Mane and Mr Ghosh, is something that no book could ever have taught me. Their selfless dedication towards guiding has imbibed me with a similar approach while dealing with colleagues or protégés I now mentor.

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