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Mentoring!

Developing the next generation of PPM leaders

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It's all very well investing in training for your project managers (PM) but are their new skills successfully applied in the 'real world' of the programmes and projects that they manage? In other words, are you seeing a return on your training investment?

Many companies are looking for new ways to ensure that the knowledge and learning picked up by their PM's is better used in the business, and forward thinking organisations are turning to one-to-one development approaches such as mentoring, to ensure that not only do they get best value out of their training but to be sure that their best PMs are getting access to deep knowledge and are fully tuned in to the wider PM industry – for the betterment of the business.

What is mentoring?

A mentor is someone with a wide range of personal and professional skills and experience who acts as coach, counsellor, networker, guardian, according to the needs of their mentee and the maturity of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Contrary to popular belief, good mentors often come from outside your organisation, and not only bring their own experience, knowledge and contacts to the relationship, but also help an essential external perspective and the ability to 'wire' their mentees into the external programme and project management (PPM) industry, exposing them to the most relevant tools and techniques, white papers, industry events and case studies.

How does the relationship work?

A PM mentee is matched with a mentor with whom they have common goals or objectives, and they follow a structured programme of learning and development over a six to twelve month period, in core PPM skills such as programme governance, stakeholder management and scoping, planning and estimating. Complementary management and leadership skills can also be learned, and a good mentor will make contact using a mix of face to face, telephone and email methods, and provide a variety of tools such as podcasts and e-learning to suit individual needs.

What makes mentoring different from coaching is that with mentoring the primary objective is for the mentee to become increasingly self-reliant over time, and to become a more independent, self-managing learner. So mentoring embeds new knowledge and ways of learning with the mentee, so eventually they become independently adept at learning, practising new skills and teaching others.

What's the value to the business?

Investing in PPM capability has been proven to provide between a 15-40% return on investment to an organisation, and pro-active schemes like mentoring help improve companies' value and reputation with important stakeholders, strategic partners and even clients – who see a business that takes mentoring seriously as an organisation concerned about its sustainability and future progression.

It's a proven fact that employees who have participated in mentoring are better placed to deliver more effective PPM as a result, and are usually more motivated and confident than their peers. What's more, offering mentoring to project managers and senior responsible owners is a great way for companies to measure their overall current PPM capability.

Moorhouse Consulting's top 5 tips to a great mentor-mentee relationship:

1. It's all about chemistry

The key to great mentoring is a good chemistry between mentor and mentee. So, make sure that the two people involved have common ground and things to achieve together, and agree basic relationship values of trust, confidentiality and openness.

Make a plan for how the course of the relationship will run, where you want to get to and how you will do it. Agree a limited scope for each mentoring session and stick to it (it will be easier to apply new knowledge and learned skills to the current programmes and projects, and to evaluate success). Agree on how to document the meetings. Ascertain who will do what, how, and when the ongoing quality and success of the relationship will be evaluated.

2. Establish a framework

Even the best relationship between mentor and mentee will not guarantee a successful outcome. The objective is for the mentor to help his/her mentee in the most effective way, and this means operating within a consistent framework that allows for: reflection and assessment of the mentor and mentee roles and their ongoing relevance and success; scheduling of the mentoring programme and its content; and, review (of progress) and improvement (of content, and of the relationship).

Keep the framework simple, and stage the process carefully. This can ensure that you explore subjects adequately with your mentee, find the right knowledge and experience to generate relevant new understanding, and arrive at actions to transfer the new understanding to the current programme or project when that new understanding has been reached.

3. Take the lead – by listening

The mentee should maintain responsibility for his/her own learning. A mentor's responsibility is to guide and set the right approach, process and environment for doing that, as well as providing direct and indirect PPM experience and external PPM inputs to enable it.

So, the buck starts and stops with the mentee – who should be the person who identifies the specific learning need and objective for each mentoring session. It is the mentee who, in the initial phase of exploration, talks about the specific challenge or problem, and the mentor that listens and guides, challenging selectively and positively, and counselling the mentee to find his or her own solution. This passive role is often hard for mentors to accept, but it is crucial. Only when full exploration of the subject from the mentee's point of view has been accomplished, should a mentor further encourage the mentee, by applying personal experiences and suggesting options to help gain new understanding.

In 'leading by listening', a mentor understands the mentee's true position and avoids taking the onus of responsibility away from the mentee. In that way you take another step towards the real point of mentoring: making the mentee increasingly less dependent on you as a mentor - and more independent and self-managing as a learner.

4. Don't rush to action

Once your mentee starts to see things differently, it's easy to get caught up in success, and rush into actions. Don't – take it slowly. Determining and planning actions are an essential step in ensuring that they are relevant, and that they will lead to the most effective retention of learning and transference of skills and knowledge to the programme or project that the mentee is working on. So, identify and discuss options thoroughly, look at the practicality of pursuing those options and the value that the mentee will get – not only in the learning, but also in improving the programme or project in the workplace. Agree what success will look like, and how to measure it. This is essential in allowing for the necessary follow-up and evaluation that is an inherent part of the mentoring process at all times.

Above all, remember that patience, and getting the pace of the relationship right, are essential ingredients of good mentoring.

5. Consolidate and apply learning frequently

Although it is the mentee's responsibility to own his or her goals for increasingly independent and self-managed learning, it is up to the mentor to create significant additional value in the relationship.

To avoid distracting from the goals of the mentee, it is always good practice to be patient in sharing your experiences and stories – but when the time is right and the mentee's learning is gaining momentum, go ahead. This is a great way of consolidating and reinforcing the learning. In the PPM context, you can share case studies, contacts, your knowledge of PPM communities and professional events, and so on. The mentee can pick and choose what will be of most value to them from the mix.

Make sure that all learning actions lead to relevant, timely and demonstrable results, to show both the mentee and his or her colleagues the performance improvements that really make a difference. After all, the aim is to (a) help the mentee solve today's problem, (b) help the mentee avoid tomorrow's problem and (c) help people view the mentee as an employee who is continuously improving and for whom it makes sense for the organisation wants to invest in.

For information on '**compass**,' Moorhouse Consulting's mentoring scheme for programme and project managers, visit www.moorhouseconsulting.com .

About the Author



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A Principal at 'APM Project Management Company of the Year' Moorhouse Consulting, **Keith Clark** has many years experience in project and programme management, across both the public and private sectors, and recent project assignments include supporting the turn around of several critical performance improvement programmes at BT. Before joining Moorhouse, Keith was a Partner at Atos, where he headed up the ongoing development of their programme management capability. Before moving into the consulting business, he worked in the electronics industry, for multi-national organisations like Hitachi Europe, where he occupied a number of senior management positions. Keith has a degree in Electronics and Electrical Engineering from the University of Birmingham. He is an accredited MSP Advanced Practitioner, an accredited PRINCE2 Practitioner and a certified Project Management Institute Project Management Professional (PMP). For more information or to contact Mr. Clark, visit www.moorhouseconsulting.com