

**Mentoring Relationships and Mentoring Agreements: An Overview**

**Why Assign a Mentor and Use an Agreement?**

Research consistently shows that the successful pairing of a mentor to a new staff member increases retention, engagement, productivity, socialization within the organization, and morale. A partnering of this nature also enhances the mentor’s leadership and communication skills and can provide him/her with a sense of accomplishment when the protégé is successful.

While informal mentoring relationships often develop organically between managers and staff over time, it is a good idea to assign a current staff to a new employee in the beginning and to use a Mentoring Agreement in order to clearly establish the roles, responsibilities, and goals of the mentor and the protégé (discussed below). An agreement also helps to ensure a higher degree of accountability from both parties, to clarify the goals of the partnership, and to avoid the mentor feeling as if s/he is being exploited.

**What a Mentoring Relationship Should *Not* Be:**

While a mentor can certainly provide on-the-job training at times, this should not be his/her primary function. In addition, unless the mentor is the supervisor exclusively, s/he should not assign tasks or review the protégé’s work on a regular basis. Instead, a mentor’s function should primarily be to provide more of an ongoing support system.

It is also important to point out that the onus should not be entirely on the mentor to “grow” the protégé. The protégé also plays an important role in that if s/he is not motivated, is resistant, or simply not a good match for the position, this is not the mentor’s fault or responsibility to correct. If the protégé does not have a genuine interest in personal and professional growth, a strong commitment to learning and acquiring new skills, and/or is not receptive to honest feedback, the relationship will not be successful no matter who the assigned mentor is.

**Appropriate Functions/Roles/Responsibilities of a Mentor:**

The primary roles of a mentor are to help the new employee become acclimated to his/her new environment and to function as an ongoing resource for wisdom, lessons learned, etc. While first line supervisors should also play a key role in these functions (and often do), a mentor can be one more resource to help new staff be properly onboarded.

To help initially establish a relationship, a mentor can function as an early point of contact for the new employee. Examples of tasks that a mentor can perform in the very early stages of employment include the following:

* Introduce the new employee to co-workers and other key people (networking)
* Explain office procedures
* Ensure the employee knows where the break room/restroom/photocopier/printer/fire exit/supplies, etc. are
* Answer any initial questions the employee has
* Explain who to contact for different issues as they arise (HR, IT, etc.)
* Assist the new employee with understanding all of the organization’s acronyms, especially if they are new to state service

Beyond these tasks routinely performed within the first few days, a mentor’s ongoing role should be to do the following:

* Help the protégé to identify with the organization and its environment over time
* Give encouragement and advice in helping the new staff deal with stressful situations or situations s/he is not familiar with yet
* Work with the protégé to develop self confidence
* Provide career guidance and advice, and function as a sounding board for the protégé when needed
* Provide tacit knowledge transfer— share lessons learned (e.g. share successes as well as mistakes s/he has made), help the new employee avoid cultural mistakes within the organization (i.e. contacting the wrong person, knowing when to escalate a situation as well as to whom, etc.), make him/her aware of unspoken protocols—anything that won’t be found in a manual but is understood by seasoned staff

**Who Should Be Selected to Be a Mentor in Your Unit:**

Mentors should be carefully chosen as they will play a critical role in your employee’s development, confidence, and engagement. The best mentors will have the following qualities:

* Possess a genuine interest in helping others
* Have significant professional experience; a strong mentor also understands the inner workings of the organization as well as the career paths within the unit
* Possess strong interpersonal/communication skills; a mentor should be seen as a leader or role model by the unit and should be a good listener *and* speaker
* Feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback
* Have a positive outlook and belief in the organization’s mission and goals
* Be willing to invest the time needed to help the new staff acclimate to the organization
* Be able to retain confidentiality

**Basic Elements Included in a Mentoring Agreement:**

A formal Agreement can be as simple or elaborate as the parties wish. Either the supervisor or the mentor can complete it. Below are some basic components that can be included, based on how formal you wish the agreement to be:

* Names and roles of each party
* Goals of the partnership
* Target length of the relationship
* Planned frequency of contact
* Target length of planned meetings or contact (daily? weekly?)
* Method(s) of contact (one-on-one meetings, emails, phone, etc.)

Both parties should sign and keep identical versions, and a copy should be retained by the supervisor.

**Basic Advice for Mentors:**

Supervisors should communicate the following to staff selected to be mentors prior to beginning the assignment:

* The mentor should not try to force a relationship—if it doesn’t feel comfortable or is not a good match for whatever reason, the supervisor should be informed so a better match can be made for the new employee
* The mentor should find out the preferred communication style for the new employee early on (in person, via email, etc.) and try to accommodate this
* Mentors should stick to meeting at the regular time(s) outlined in the Mentoring Agreement
* Meetings are best held in an informal setting
* Discussions should be confidential
* The mentor should not worry about covering everything right away or s/he will overwhelm the new staff
* The mentor should make sure the new employee understands when s/he is and is not available. (Just because a staff is now a mentor does not mean the protégé has free reign to interrupt the mentor or demand his/her time.) Meetings should be convenient for *both* parties