

MENTORING: THE IMMIGRATING PROFESSIONAL'S STEP TO SUCCESS

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Traditional goals of an organization's mentoring program are to promote corporate knowledge, develop effective leaders, and enrich personal development among its participants. Mentoring is especially important to the employees who have migrated to the United States and must now communicate with workplace peers in a non-native language. Unfamiliarity with the daily changing environment of the English language can be a major handicap for today's immigrating engineer. A mentor from a company's professional ranks can be a valuable asset to any non-native engineer wishing to learn and understand office customs, policies, taboos, and politics.

An understanding of the work environment can be enhanced greatly for those immigrating professionals involved in planned, and structured, mentor programs. Engineers with a desire for future growth will acquire information more quickly, and receive career guidance that normally would take years to gather without a mentor. This accelerated educational process is critical in a market where the solid fundamentals of English usage may translate to promotions.

Communication skills are more important now than ever for successful professional engineers. Today, it is not enough to possess technical skills. In addition to technical knowledge, foreign-born engineers need to be able to sell their ideas as well as market the goals of their organizations.

Very often, engineers with weak English-speaking skills are placed at a disadvantage by peers and management alike; both factions may equate engineering knowledge with oral proficiency. Besides the language barrier, some new immigrants have difficulties dealing with the concepts of "teaming" and how it works; furthermore, they may possess personal value systems that differ from the U.S. population (Abbasi and Hollman, 1991). However, employees and managers must realize that being different, linguistically and culturally, does not mean that the engineer is not a valuable member of the team. One positive way to close this gap between perception and reality would be for engineers to enlist the aid of a mentor.

The mentor's task would include exposing protégés to old ideas in new ways. Enlightenment would include advice on: idiomatic characteristics of the language; organizational rules; accepted business practices; professional policies and regulations; and cultural office taboos. Mentors can educate engineers in areas of personal growth, as well as provide their "students" informal guidance concerning the work environment. Cultural insight can grow from these mentor-learner relationships and be deeply meaningful to people thrown into a situation where their personal standards may not be understood, nor considered proper.

It is common knowledge that the work force is changing, culturally. Organizational norms are being altered by the increasing number of people who are different than the majority. While this is a positive change, it raises some new and serious issues. Engineers with English as a first language are sharing work arenas and job tasks with other engineers who were born and educated elsewhere, and who speak English as a second language. Successful mentors can be partners in those engineers' transition from one cultural state of mind to another.

The mentor's support is especially important when foreign-born professionals face new challenges on the job. Guidance from company "graybeards" can stimulate individual growth when foreign-born engineering professionals stray into uncharted corporate waters. These leaders can help those individuals move beyond the obstacles by becoming partners in designing plans that will eliminate roadblocks and hurdles. Mentors will: teach them to be proactive, reminding them to stay current on new technologies and markets trends; advise them to take advantage of new and short-term opportunities during periods of rapid change; and encourage them to be aware of local and national politics that affect or favor their fields.

However, there is more to the mentoring role than providing information to protégés. As people who are well respected and admired in the profession, mentors can open doors for those individuals seeking professional guidance. Mentors possess knowledge and experience that can help make immigrating professionals more valuable throughout organizations by helping increase their personal and professional performances. Mentoring, too, can prove important in enhancing their efforts concerning corporate vision and value.

By assisting them to expand their career possibilities, mentors can remind their protégés to stay motivated and focused on their goals. And within the relationships can come new insight into office jargon, cultural traditions of peers, and avenues for advancement. Engineers new to the country and new to the language can find the corporate ladder a lot less towering when they consider enrollment in a formal mentoring program.

The right mentors, with the appropriate goal-setting tools, can help protégés accelerate their careers and reach their full potential in the organization. Mentors are individuals who care, ones who have been there and want to help protégés get to where they want to go. Protégés should look for individuals who believe in them and are forthright. And,

most of all, "tap" into individuals who can be trusted and ones that are not afraid of hard work.

Once protégés develop their personal vision, confidence and competence--and uncover their value priorities and recognize their role importance--they may become wonderful new mentors. This role turnaround is called reverse mentoring. Now students become the teachers, supporting peers in making the transition to new roles and new cultures.

Being mentors can be a challenging new learning experience for foreign-born engineers, leading to a stimulating voyage of self-discovery that offers possibilities for personal fulfillment and achievement. It is not a one-way learning process, because it teaches others how to live with diversity in the workplace and, perhaps to appreciate it. According to Sloan (1996), mentoring can be an important means toward achieving racial and gender diversity in the professional work force. As more and more agencies set diversity as a goal, these programs become even more important.

However, the one-on-one mentoring concept is not the only avenue to learning. Other mentoring possibilities exist, such as team/group relationships along with short-term and one-time project exercises. The immigrating engineer needs only to find the approach that works best for his or her situation.

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