

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL MENTORNET PARTNER PROGRAM

Rosalie M. Clemens¹

Abstract — In late 2001, 3M Company introduced the MentorNet partner program “MentorNet at 3M” and became a sponsoring partner of MentorNet. At this time, more than 300 3M employees actively participate in MentorNet. In this paper, the strategies 3M used to successfully develop its program are presented.

Index Terms — 3M, corporation, industry, mentoring, MentorNet, MentorNet partner program

1. BE A SELF-STARTER

For years, Maria dreamed of traveling to Peru. She wanted to see the world from atop some of the highest mountains and experience ancient Andean culture. TV travel shows on South America captivated her and she devoured every sight and sound. However, delight turned sour and she complained regularly to her housemate, “I’m never going to see that part of the world. I don’t speak Spanish, I don’t climb mountains, and I can’t afford the trip, besides.”

Her housemate, sick of the whining, finally exploded and told her—nicely—to “get her act together” and take some initiative. The scolding worked. Maria enrolled in a Spanish class, worked out at the gym three times a week, and opened an “Andes-account” at her bank where she deposited at least \$100 each month to fund the trip. Fifteen months later she found herself on a three-week trek across the Andes, making Peruvian friends and having the time of her life.

Establishing a MentorNet partner program in a company doesn’t happen overnight. Just like Maria’s Andean adventure, a MentorNet partner program does require advance preparation and initiative, but it is not an unattainable goal. Small, manageable steps are the path to success. Making connections with the right people, requesting the necessary resources, documenting the project and marketing its benefits—these are all part of the journey. Depending on the size of the company, initial efforts might take more or less time, but a well thought-out plan will reap rewards.

Having upper management rank within a company prior to initiating a MentorNet partner program undoubtedly gives you an advantage, but it is not a prerequisite; the following strategies should work for almost anyone committed to creating a home for MentorNet in his or her company.

2. LINK MENTORNET TO COMPANY VALUES

Almost every company, large or small, has a vision or mission and dedicates itself to certain values. Linking MentorNet to those values will lend your campaign credibility with corporate leadership—key decision makers. Fortunately, MentorNet coincides directly with some of the most widely held corporate values: diversity, education, and community.

Companies have learned that in order to succeed in a global marketplace they must create inclusive work environments that are welcoming and respectful of diversity, that assist underprivileged groups and minorities, that participate in education, and that strengthen social and community bonds.

MentorNet involvement can easily be used by a company to augment its existing diversity programs, or the program can serve as a low-key expansion of the company’s community efforts and volunteer opportunities. Find and articulate MentorNet’s connection to a specific company’s values statement and most likely, corporate support will not be far behind.

3. CREATE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Coordinating a MentorNet partner program requires frequent and ongoing communication in at least three directions: communication with (1) mentors, (2) the coordinating team in the company, and (3) the national MentorNet office. In addition, there will be irregular communication required with inside and outside media. During recruiting time all eligible employees must be reached.

Creating effective methods of communicating with these various constituents can be particularly challenging. This may be the “communication age,” but finding the best ways to deliver thoughts and ideas can be far from easy. One must understand the communication network in the company and what internal communication channels are available—newspapers, monthly newsletters, internal TV channels, lunch talks, email, intra-mail, intranet, e-meetings, electronic team rooms, special interest groups, etc.

Staying in touch with the coordinating team is usually easy because only a few people will be involved in organizational tasks. The same is true for contact with the MentorNet headquarters.

¹ Rosalie M. Clemens, 3M Company, 11705 Research Blvd., 003-1N-06, Austin, TX 78759, (512) 984-2827, rmclemens@mmm.com

Electronic communication methods can be wonderful tools for maintaining contact with recruited and matched mentors. These tools are time-independent and can be used globally at virtually no cost. Creating a corporate intranet site for the MentorNet partner program helps keep mentors informed about the latest events. Another option is to publish updates on MentorNet activities in the company newsletter. An e-forum, chat room or similar electronic blackboard provides excellent opportunities for exchanging ideas, finding answers to mentoring questions, and networking with internal mentors.

In order to recruit mentors and promote the program, one should employ all communication tools available. In general, there is no such thing as too much PR. Only by publicizing MentorNet repeatedly and through several different channels can one be sure to reach a significant portion of interested employees. So, it's crucial to employ all of the networking possibilities and communication resources a company has to offer.

External media will also help your cause. Because supporting MentorNet is good for the community—both inside and outside the company walls—companies may expect to receive some positive press. Often, it is the MentorNet coordinator's responsibility to help create and promote that press exposure. When MentorNet helps your company look good, the prospects of continued and expanded support for your program look good, too. In any instance, communications efforts using your company's name should be coordinated with the corporate communications department.

4. BE PATIENT AND PERSISTENT

Developing a new MentorNet partner program demands a lot from the facilitator on many levels. At one time or another, situations arise: management won't listen to requests, mentors will complain, MentorNet staff will ask for input...and money. The challenges one faces can sometimes seem endless, so patience will not only be a virtue here, but essential. Never take anything personal. Instead, keep smiling!

Many of the challenges one faces are really opportunities for enhancing the program's level of support. For example, inevitably, many people will have questions and concerns about the program; while it sometimes seems impossible to answer all requests, every response given only helps further establish goodwill and good relationships between the coordinator and everybody else in the company.

Persistence is the key to a successful recruitment strategy. Of course, you want to be sensitive to email spam issues, but that shouldn't stop you from finding ways to get your message out there regularly. Keep it fresh, interesting and current.

5. BUILD ON DATA AND SMALL SUCCESSES

When Maria first started her Spanish lessons, she thought she'd never be able to communicate with native speakers.

There was just so much to learn that she couldn't see light at the end of the tunnel. But then she took her first test and got a good grade, and that motivated her to continue learning the language.

Similarly, in the start-up phase of a MentorNet partner program, the task may seem daunting. Only a few people will know about the project and support it. Senior management might be reluctant at first, but once positive feedback from mentors begins to surface, participation increases, and positive media exposure is generated, the skeptics will become converts. The avalanche has only just begun. Collect all feedback and use good judgment in deciding when and how to present it.

Table 1 shows 3M's data after the second year of "MentorNet at 3M" start-up. The goal between the first and second year of MentorNet involvement was not only to increase the overall number of mentors, but also to particularly increase the number of managers participating actively in the program. With almost four times as many managers serving as mentors in 2002/03, this goal was achieved. The result shows that 3M management has accepted "MentorNet at 3M" as a valuable diversity program.

TABLE I
3M MENTORS BY POSITION

Category	2001	2002	Increase
Engineer	39	146	274 %
Scientist	34	52	53 %
Manager	7	33	371 %
Six Sigma	0	20	N/A
Other	3	23	667 %
Total	83	274	230 %

6. STRIVE FOR THE BEST, PREPARE FOR THE WORST

Maria was very ambitious with her "Andes project" at first. Her goal was to complete all the studying and fundraising in about eight months. In the end, it took her almost twice as long. She changed jobs in between and wasn't able to save as much money as she had hoped. She also had an accident that made it impossible for her to continue her workout for more than three months. Some of her savings went to pay for doctor's bills.

It is important to do the MentorNet program groundwork thoroughly and carefully. It pays off to take time to talk to everyone involved—managers and mentors. One must strive to build trusting relationships and not get discouraged by setbacks and delays. It helps to plan ahead and anticipate delays. If one always keeps the worst-case scenario in mind—not to be pessimistic, but to be realistic—one will be well prepared.

7. (YOU WILL) BE A ROLE MODEL

Like it or not, coordinating a MentorNet partner program will put you in the spotlight. Mentors will look to you for guidance and encouragement. Management will seek you out for updates on your progress. You will be representing the program internally and externally to many people whom you may never meet. You will be visible! Knowing that, you will want to demonstrate the best possible example to others of what MentorNet is all about. Set high standards for yourself and your mentors will match those efforts. As a program coordinator, in a real way, you will be a mentor of mentors, and that's one of the greatest opportunities you can have. Take it seriously, but enjoy it, too!

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

"MentorNet at 3M" is supported by the 3M Technical Council and 3M Technical Forum. In particular, I am indebted to Steven Webster, John Stephan and William French. Thanks to Bruce Volbeda for his help with this article.