My Paper for WEPAN 2007

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Empowering Women to Lead in Business Environment through Effective Mentoring

Abstract

Diversity in work area is something that is taken seriously in the recent years. It is not only gender diversity but also 'thought diversity'. Bringing up ratios of more women workers and .representation from various nationalities, race and so on is on the agenda of every meeting of a corporate house to bring about positive changes. Empowering Diversity is based on the concept that both individuals and organizations function most effectively in culturally empowered environments. Such environments fully recognize the significant benefits of diversity, include members of diverse cultural groups as full participants, act to eliminate all forms of discriminatory behavior and actively seek to empower all members with the skills and opportunities needed for both individual and organizational success. Put simply, culturally empowered environments increase the likelihood of success for a diverse range of individuals. In this context there is a positive attempt to bring diversity in the top management level and women are seen in the hitherto male dominated positions even though the ratio is dismal. Progress in the form of various training programs to bring in diversity, especially on gender centric issues to clear the way for more women to pursue higher levels within a company is being made. It is in this area of gender sensitivity and diversity in work areas where proper practices of mentoring is needed. Many corporate houses like IBM[1] Mind Tree, Infosys, Accenture[2]) have in-house mentoring system which trains fresh recruits up to managerial positions by the senior employees. In this paper, I would like to share some initiatives by IBM in mentoring young women employees to become future leaders.

In today's business environment, diversity of thought is essential. It is in this area of gender sensitivity and diversity in work areas where proper practices of mentoring is needed.

Introduction

I will start my paper with an insight from ancient Hindu mythology. "Bhagavad-Gita" literally meaning 'song of GOD' gives information regarding the purpose of human existence, the immortality of the soul and our eternal relationship with God. It dates back to 3102 B.C when Lord Krishna spoke on the battelefield of Kuruksetra just prior to the commencement of the 'Mahabharata War'. The content of the text is a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna . Responding to Arjuna's confusion and moral dilemma, Kirshna explains to Arjuna his duties as a famous warrior and Prince and elaborates on a number of different Yogic, Vedantic and philosophies with examples and analogies.

The focus of my topic today, 'Mentoring' traces back its origin to very ancient times as depicted in the story above. In the Mahabharata, Lord Krishna enlightens Arjuna about his duties, displaying the true virtues of a guru, which combines the qualities of friend, guide and philosopher.

Mentor is synonymous with a person who guides another toward the path of education, growth, maturity, development, progress and prosperity. An organisation can use the art of mentoring as a tool to help bring out the best in their employees, leveraging the synergy for individual and organisational growth and success.

Today's professionals, who need to keep pace and get ahead in a fast-paced, competitive economy, need proper direction coupled with coaching and advice from their more experienced peers. Not getting the right advice can compound this challenge, prompting them to either start doubting their own capabilities or making them want to move on to a 'more encouraging' work culture. A mentor, can help them find their personal vision and individual path to development, enhance their skills and accelerate learning and career growth.

IBM is an organization which values diversity, Diversity in work area is something that is taken seriously in the recent years. It is not only gender diversity bit also 'thought diversity'. IBM unites different cultures, languages, professions and perspectives in one globally integrated body. This unique combination of viewpoints fuels IBM technologies, products, services and our commitment to client success.

Bringing up ratios of more women workers and representation from various nationalities, race and so on is on the agenda of every meeting of a Corporate house to bring about positive changes. Empowering diversity is based on the concept that both individuals and organizations function most effectively in culturally empowered environments. Mentoring is one way to achieve this positive change in corporate environment

Why mentoring is needed?

Many people believe that the only way to build careers is to put their head down and focus on the work at hand. While competence in the current job is a prerequisite for success, peripheral vision and networks are also important and increasingly so as one progresses upward through various levels of leadership. Networking and mentoring helps in career advancement .

Knowledge organisations like IT are full of experienced individuals with varied interests and expertise. The optimal mentor possesses the expertise, commitment, understanding and time to provide assistance. Each person brings different knowledge and expertise to the organisation, and understanding this in all its depth helps a mentor adjust to the varying needs and potential of the protégés.

Mentors have always existed in the workplace and the problem, then and now, is that not everyone has equal access to mentors. Research consistently finds that women, particularly women of color, cite lack of mentoring as a critical barrier to their advancement. How can organisations help women to grow in their career ?

According to the Catalyst study[3] women who list another woman as the most helpful person in their careers are more likely than other women to have reached the top one or two reporting levels in a company. "Thus, while it is true that support and mentoring by higher-level executives — both male and female — are essential to developing leaders, we find that women mentoring women is of special importance," the study says. And it's mentoring programs that are formed organically, rather than those mandated by HR, that are most successful. Mentoring should be an organization level initiative. It is required for advancement to higher levels in an organization. In IBM, mentoring is part of our job.

How Mentoring can be implemented?

To enable professional women to achieve their maximum potential and to help employers capitalize fully on the talents of their women employees, the following formal or informal ways of mentoring and networking can help in building a healthy environment for career and personal development of employees.

There are several ways to implement mentoring within an organization and all must start at the top. If an organisation's leaders don't value mentoring, then neither will the rest of the team members. To establish mentoring program, one starts with the end in mind. Do you want to create a pipeline of future managers, or one that improves skills, confidence and ability within people's current position? Also, one should recognize that people in sales, product development, and consulting have different needs, desires, skills and career paths, so the program should be designed to fit specific career fields. Usually, managers can help identify mentors. To implement a successful mentoring program, it is important to anticipate the needs of those who want cross disciplines: engineers who want to be in sales, product managers who want to be consultants, and so on. Some examples of implementing networking and mentoring are:

- Strategies from Top Women on Secrets of Success

- Roundtables with accomplished senior women leaders

- Webcasts and telephone calls sharing knowledge and experience

- Mentoring drive – list of available mentors across functional, leadership, strategy

- Identify top talent and ensure that they are groomed to be future leaders

- Corporate give back and a commitment from senior leadership team towards mentoring.

- Have a buddy assigned to the new hire to know the processes and navigate through organization polices, procedures.

- Organise talks by successful mentors to share their experiences

- In addition to the organic mentoring programs, we also have extended e-mentoring program to mentor a girl child. This is relevant in India and across the globe to encourage interest in science and bring in the women talent pool into technology.

- If your organization needs to start mentoring program , first start with creating list of protégé and mentors . Assign protégé to appropriate mentors.

- The method of mentoring can be scheduled face to face meetings, telephone calls.

- For any kind of mentoring progam to be successful, there should be sharing of the 'know-

how' with a larger audience within an organization.

One form of measuring success of organic mentoring program is to spend a good part of the time discussing what knowledge transfer, skills improvement and general corporate citizenship activities the person has contributed to. This will ensure that both leaders and team members begin to look at situations with an added dimension: How to help others be successful and reach their goals – as part of 'give back' community.

Mentorship process

A mentor must, first of all, be good at listening and quickly grasping the core of any problem. A mentor's finest qualities are care and compassion, and (s)he must spend time and energy to understand the protégés and their capabilities. It is only after this that (s)he provides new perspectives by sharing experiences and vision for the protégés.

The mentorship process should advocate openness of thought and expression amongst protégés. Both the mentor and protégé should set realistic expectations from each other. Definite, mutually agreed time frame should be set, with an open door policy at all hours of the day to make the protégé comfortable. Formal and informal sessions should be organised to enable the protégé to understand the organisation's goals, skill sets, plans and challenges. This will help guide the protégés towards career paths that best fit their talent, abilities and inclinations. Sensitivity and complete confidentiality regarding the information shared by protégés on professional and personal counts is essential. I have mentors who are across IBM in different countries. In today's globally integrated world, it is important to know working culture and build mentoring relationship across boundaries. Once a quarter I have mentoring calls with my mentor where in I share my accomplishments and also seek guidance regarding any pressing matters, career path, current and future technology, etc. The mentoring process can be traditional, job shadowing, formal or informal talks.

Successful mentoring requires lot of care, planning and conscious efforts, by both mentor and protégé.

It is important to have more than one mentor in an organization to build and grow your network . Strategic relationships require an investment of your time and are a requirement for success in the orgranisation. Having strategic networks is part of being an executive, and in fact, as you gain greater responsibility in your career in an organization, your role will require you to have a broader based perspective and outreach to other people - in other words, to build a strategic network. A mentor helps you broaden and deepen your knowledge about your organization to gain a broader business perspective outside your current role.

If you are looking for a mentor, the first step is to know what **you want** from a mentoring relationship. Once you understand your personal goals, the next step is to find a mentor who matches your needs. A mentor database provides an easy way to search for potential mentors (based on skill, business area, location or diversity group) and to review the profiles of mentors that interest you. It may also be helpful to discuss possible mentors with your manager. If you

want to become a mentor, you could register in the mentor database and create a Mentor Profile. Once your profile is part of the Mentor Network, you may be contacted by an employee about being a mentor.

Summary

The recipe of success for any knowledge economy organisation lies on its ability to leverage human potential, so as to deliver business results. Employee development and retention plays an important role in their growth. Empowering diversity in an organization to build an inclusive environment and develop successful business leaders through effective mentoring will bring in positive changes in the company.

With a mentor as their best friend, guide and philosopher, at work and at times of need, employees are able to raise their performance bar continuously. They will find their organisation and work environment as one full of fun, excitement, achievement and reward.

Hear from IBM Senior Leaders

Linda Sanford, IBM CHQ, Enterprise On Demand Senior Vice President, Enterprise On Demand Transformation & Information Technology

"Over the years, I've been mentored and served as a mentor to a number of people. I've probably gotten as much or more out of these relationships than my protégés, if that's the right term. It's helped me build a network of talented people who I have stayed close with as they've gained more responsibility in the organization. We have several generations of IBMers in the company right now, and we can learn from each other. Mentoring relationships allow for that two-way learning and exchange of ideas and experience. It's well worth the effort and small investment of time it takes to seek a mentor -- or to become a mentor yourself."

Irma Martinez, IBM CHQ, Technology & Manufacturing HR Manager, RTP Area

Irma serves as a mentor, and despite her time constraints, she makes it a priority to meet with the people she mentors. When asked about the value of mentoring, Irma stated, "Mentoring is of value to the mentor as well as the mentee because it promotes continuous learning through the process of giving and receiving information and feedback".

She believes that mentoring is critical in bridging gaps and for IBM to be successful as a global leader, "we must focus on relationship building across geography and business units, and see mentoring as a critical retention tool".

She recommends reverse mentoring for occasions when it is helpful to learn information from others, such as learning about cultures when conducting cross border business. Through her relationships with her mentees who are new hires, she emphasizes their developmental needs to shorten the adjustment period into the IBM culture and helps them overcome the feeling of being lost.

Finally, Irma has a personal investment in mentoring others and her reward is to "see the positive changes you can create in someone else's life".

References

1. IBM is a registered trademark of IBM Corporation in the United States, other countries, or both.

2. Other company, product, or service names may be trademarks or service marks of others.

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