



Making mentoring stick: a case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to provide a case study of the mentoring process within Kentz Engineers & Constructors.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reflects the experiences of those leading the mentoring process within Kentz with insights extracted from a process of action, reflection and live experimentation.

Findings – The paper concludes that mentoring is effective in the early stages of careers, but that care needs to be taken to ensure that organization-wide mentoring programmes achieve their objectives.

Research limitations/implications – Findings are based on the experiences of one company and further research would be needed in order to generalize from these findings.

Originality/value – The mentoring process analysed is unique to Kentz Engineers & Constructors, drawing on lessons from the broader literature. Published papers from the construction industry are rare in comparison with other market sectors.

Keywords Mentoring, Construction Industry, Leadership development

Paper type Case study

Introduction

An article by Matthew Boyle (2005) in *Training* makes the case for this paper in direct, uncompromising style:

Like diversity, “mentoring” is one of those wonderful concepts that corporate America loves to prattle on about. But it’s also one of the easiest things to screw up.

He continues with a quote from Noel Tichy, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Michigan University and former director of GE Crotonville, General Electric’s well-known leadership school from which many organizations have drawn inspiration. The quote is:

Most formal mentoring programs suck.

Such sentiments provide an eye-catching start to a paper and, of course, such circular conversations are not confined to executives in the USA. However, it is what Boyle says next that states succinctly the central dilemma to be discussed:

Too much structure – training, guidelines, questionnaires, paperwork – frequently suffocates everyone involved. Conversely, too little structure can lead to lousy mentors, poor communication, and mentees who operate under the delusion that their mentor will not only get them promoted, but solve all their life’s problems.



This article provides a case study of the mentoring programme introduced into Kentz Engineers & Constructors in 2007, building upon earlier mentoring activities within the group. It provides a practitioner perspective from those charged with leading this intervention. It identifies a number of central dilemmas likely to be faced by others adopting similar programmes in their organizations. It discusses the rationale for the mentoring programme and process embedded within Kentz, the philosophy underpinning it, and highlights the modifications and improvements needed to make mentoring stick.

Formed in Ireland in 1919, Kentz is an international business employing more than 10,000 people in over 20 countries – predominantly Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. With the aim of being “The service provider of choice” (Kentz, 2009), the company delivers projects and provides specialist expertise in sectors including oil and gas, power, infrastructure and process industries. The cumulative expertise of its people has long been a differentiator for Kentz and a barrier to others who would seek to emulate its success. The development of people within Kentz is accordingly not something that can stand still or be neglected. Providing early career mentoring is a manifestation of this commitment.

Why companies should invest in mentoring

Before addressing the “how” question of how to introduce an organization-wide mentoring intervention, it is worth first considering “why”, the rationale.

Writing in the magazine *Business Executive*, author and consultant Linda King Taylor (2009) recalled an occasion when together with her mentor Edward de Bono they were invited to debate the topic of boredom in business on the BBC radio programme *Start the Week*. Between them they sketched the outline of the “best businesses” that would be successful by daring to be different and exceeding expectations. These were businesses where the prevailing corporate culture fostered creativity, social responsibility, positive ethics and respect. Boring they were not.

After some thought de Bono added that the best businesses would have mentoring programmes in which newcomers gained advice and best practice from experienced people, a thought King Taylor fleshes out as follows:

Mentoring inspires individuals to improve their learning so that so that they meet, even exceed, their potential performance, philosophy and personality. Many of the world’s most successful people have benefitted from having a mentor.

King Taylor’s point is well made and chimes with one of the central points of an article by Cohn *et al.* (2008) who found that:

Successful companies have intense talent management processes in place and put identified innovators in the line of fire, where natural innovators thrive. Mentoring and peer networks are crucial for providing support.

Cohn and his colleagues are making a relatively narrow point relating to the development of innovators, yet their focus on talent management, experiential learning, mentoring and peer networks will be recognized by many in organizations seeking to develop a broader range of talent – the breakthrough innovators, but also those capable of leading continuous improvements, as well as those who will ensure consistency and conformance.

For graduates entering the workforce the benefits of career-oriented mentoring, and the resulting enhanced social networks, can be seen in terms of career progression and greater work effectiveness (e.g. Aryee *et al.*, 1996). It is a process that builds capability for the medium-to-long-term, however there can be a vital short-term pay-off in terms of the improved retention of talent. A survey by Clear-Rock, who specialize in outplacement and executive coaching, is among those that has highlighted the importance of mentoring in retaining high-potential employees, as part of a mix that also includes: more careful selection; better training and coaching; better compensation and benefits; improved orientation and assimilation programmes; and more flexible work schedules.

Underpinning Kentz' approach to the development of its employees is that the enterprise itself is the most important place in which to learn. Young people entering the business as graduates, qualified apprentices or as high potential achievers (Hi-Pots) discover that they will be awarded significant responsibility relatively early in their careers and have the opportunity to demonstrate and develop their capability.

Mentoring is a key part of the support provided to this key group of employees as a major component of a broader process that encompasses achieving work performance objectives, having exposure to a number of areas of the business through work-rotation, workshops based on action learning principles, and the broader development of peer support and social networks.

A design for an organization-wide mentoring process

Kentz formal mentoring process has specific goals and is contained to those participating in its Supervisory Management Development Programme (SMDP), an 18-24 month foundation for all graduates, qualified trades people and Hi-Pots. The underpinning philosophy behind the programme is that regardless of the background or expertise of the person on entry to the company, all with the drive and ability have the potential to reach the very top, and everyone can maximize their potential.

The elements of the SMDP are:

- (1) early appointment of a mentor and provision of Kentz Mentoring Manual;
- (2) participation in the appropriate SMDP route devised for engineers, qualified trades, finance graduates, business graduates, Hi-Pots, etc.;
- (3) each route has an accompanying manual – , e.g. Rotation Exposure Experience Programme (REEP) manual for graduate engineers – identifying business rotation areas and what can be achieved in each of them (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2008);
- (4) appropriate rotation within the project, region, business line or the company;
- (5) specific outcomes for each rotation, together with the order of rotations and their duration is agreed by the mentor, mentee and line manager;
- (6) workshops are provided in frontline management skills, leadership skills and relating to Kentz business functions;
- (7) participants have access to all of Kentz soft skills enhancement courses, functional and technical training where needs are identified and agreed with the mentor and line manager;
- (8) software is provided, with support and facilitation, to promote peer networks and broader social networks; and
- (9) a talent management system has been introduced to track outcomes.

Structure and organization is needed to ensure the operational effectiveness and integrity of the process. In order to achieve this:

- (1) a senior corporate-level HR manager is custodian the process globally, ensuring conformance and ongoing improvement;
- (2) within each region the regional HR manager has responsibility for the effectiveness of the process in their area;
- (3) a mentoring facilitator is responsible in each region specifically to ensure mentor/mentee meetings are effective and reports completed; and
- (4) regular reports on the mentoring process are submitted to Kentz Group Board of Management.

The mentors themselves are volunteers. Preference is given to those able to demonstrate empathy with those starting out, and a belief in the development of themselves and their staff. Before becoming a mentor a two-day *Kentz Mentor* training programme must be completed.

Empowering mentees to lead

Ensuring that mentees are left in no doubt regarding their responsibility to actively drive the mentoring process is a feature of this intervention within Kentz. At the same time, significant work goes in to ensuring that they are pushing at an already open door. A common failure in mentoring programmes can be that mentors are under-utilized. It should be remembered that such behaviour is not confined to the young. Writing in *Harvard Business Review*, Friel and Duboff (2009) provided a parable for our times, although it could have been set in any time:

A few years ago a highly respected and accomplished CEO retired. His name would be familiar to you: He went on to write a management best seller and now sits on the faculty of a prestigious business school. Executives routinely seek out his wisdom as they face their own strategic and organizational challenges. But in the months following his long and carefully planned retirement from the company, one person notably failed to call on him: his successor. This retired leader told us that he had offered his help, sincerely promised to make himself available whenever his counsel was needed. . .

Mentees must feel that they “own” the mentoring process. They, after all, are the individuals with most to gain. However, for many it can seem like an unreal stretch from being new of the scene and just starting out to actively leading a key relationship with a more senior member of staff. It takes effort, experience and reflection. A workshop and assignment process is in place to help develop management and leadership skills and embed notions of the benefits of a culture of accountability.

Following the Frontline Leadership Skills workshop the question “What leadership skills do you believe will be most useful in your relationship with your mentor and line manager?” is posed. A considered response is then posted within the community blog for this group, a restricted access discussion area, and feedback from peers must be sought and provided. A selection of brief extracts are reproduced below to give a flavour of the insights shared.

Mentee A:

The key skills I think essential are communication, decision-making and achieving a good balance between concern for people and concern for results.

Mentee B:

When approaching your mentor you need to have a clear path in mind for your future so you can help your mentor [to] help you. One leadership skill that I would consider necessary for improving my relationship with my mentor is to identify a clear future picture.

Mentee C:

By being goal orientated, having a clear future picture, having a drive about me, being consistent in what I say and do, being enthusiastic and optimistic and being able to create ways to have a laugh together can only benefit me both on a professional level and a personal level.

Mentee D:

When I examine the relationship I have with my mentor and line managers, it's fair to say that they all have different leadership skills, where some are more useful than others. The leadership style that would reflect my mentor would be democratic and paternalistic. As a result of his leadership styles our relationship would be a very trustworthy and sound one.

Mentee E:

Mutual respect between both mentor and mentee is a key ingredient to the healthy relationship we have. Communication is a vital aspect in any relationship and this is also true in sustaining the relationship between mentor and mentee. The relationship can only work if there is a mutual trust between both parties.

The first objective of such reflections is to encourage the mentee to think deeply about what is required of them in order for their mentoring relationship to work. A second important objective is to build peer support in order that assumptions can be questioned, workable solutions proposed and confidence built in the participants. There are signs that mentees are beginning to regard themselves as part of a continuum in which the advice of peers can be sought, as can contributions from those one or two years ahead of them.

The realities of embedding mentoring

Getting the structure right, to return to the opening statements of this article, is no easy task. The construction industry is a demanding place to work. It is outputs oriented – completed profitable projects with highly satisfied clients. It leads to an inevitable tension between short-term operational delivery and longer term developmental objectives. While the words “delivery of the project” would ideally be substituted for “crisis of the moment” the words of Wing (2009) have resonance:

Often we're so busy managing the crisis of the moment that we don't have time for important things that never become urgent. A good example would be mentoring less experienced employees, perhaps especially those who don't report to us. This is a shame because mentoring is not only valuable to the firm – it's intrinsically rewarding.

Business with the day-to-day can be the death of a mentoring process. Without exception mentors have been keen on the process and delighted to be involved in the development of others, yet all have experienced genuine difficulties in prioritizing and allocating time. Mentees too can make similar arguments regarding their own

workloads, and senior managers have to be sensitive to the needs of keeping to schedule with projects. It is a business reality, but one that must be overcome.

SMDP participants provide high quality work in meeting operational objectives. They may have clients relying on them and relatively large numbers of artisans reporting to them. Rotating them to other parts of the project or the business clearly needs care, planning and a resolute eye to the future.

In working with project and work realities mentors, mentees and others have been invited to participate in the refinement of the mentoring process. Broad engagement in its initial design and subsequent refinement has been vital as has, the drive from the CEO and senior management for the process to succeed.

Introducing new initiatives into organizations can be relatively straightforward. Ensuring that they “stick” can be much more all consuming. Key elements of this have been:

- (1) simplifying and reducing reporting requirements while simultaneously ensuring greater conformance in the submission of remaining reports by including them in the “Integrated Management System” that ensures ISO 9001 and linking to the balanced scorecard measures of mentors;
- (2) remaining true to the original principles behind the mentoring process, that consistency would be provided across the group in terms of manuals, training inputs, and reporting outputs, but that much autonomy to make decisions would rest locally to reflect business realities. In particular that the order of work rotations, their duration, and precise outputs be local decisions; and
- (3) HR have shown more day-to-day leadership within the process than was initially seen as desirable in order to ensure effective mentor/mentee meetings, reporting and effective work rotations.

In conclusion

Kentz mentoring process is a work-in-progress – all mentoring processes will remain works-in-progress if they are to remain relevant to changing business needs. It is to be hoped that the experiences related will resonate with others, and that lessons learned may have more general application, although every organization will have its own unique needs and circumstances.

Among these lessons are that mentoring has lasting benefits, but that formal programmes can fail to reflect this. An organization-wide mentoring process needs to balance the needs for uniformity with flexibility, needs to foster accountability, and needs to be refined in the light of practical realities. Above all it needs people who are committed to stick with the process in order to ensure its success.

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