



Making Mentoring Actually Work

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Webinar Objectives

- Explore The Promise And Potential Of Mentoring Programs
- Understand Why Many Mentoring Programs Fail To Deliver On Their Promises
- Identify What Is Required In Building A Successful Mentoring Program



Defining Our Terms

Mentor

Defining 'Mentor'

- 'Mentor' Means:
 - Someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person
 - A trusted counselor or guide
 - Tutor, coach
- Source: [merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com)
 - Definition taken on 13 December 2021

Defining 'Mentor'

- 'Mentor' means:
 - A mentor is someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person.
 - In an organizational setting, a mentor influences the personal and professional growth of a mentee.
 - Most traditional mentorships involve having senior employees mentor more junior employees, but mentors do not necessarily have to be more senior than the people they mentor.
 - What matters is that mentors have experience that others can learn from.
- Source: [merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com)
 - Definition taken on 13 January 2025

What Does The PMBOK Have To Say?

- Not A Great Deal, In This Case
 - The term 'mentor' appears exactly seven times in the document
- Specific Instances Are:
 - Team development
 - Addressing team member knowledge gaps through training, mentoring or coaching
 - Sponsorship
 - Mentoring of sponsors by a "Value Delivery Office"
 - Being a coach and mentor to the project team
 - Supporting success
 - Demonstrating personal commitment
 - Leadership opportunities in teams
 - Coaching and mentoring fellow team members

An Important Note

- Virtually everywhere the term 'mentor' appears, so does the term 'coach'
 - They are being used as synonyms
 - They are not
- Coaching
 - Learner-driven development activity, focused on supporting individual goals
 - Not an explicit or necessarily even an implicit hierarchy
 - The role of coach is to bring process, guidance, accountability or at least focus
- Mentoring
 - Skill- or knowledge-driven development activity, focused on a particular topic
 - There may or may not be a hierarchical relationship
 - There is knowledge of the mentor that is sought, valued or seen as necessary for the participant



The Promise Of Mentoring Programs

The Promise Of Mentoring Programs

- Mentoring Programs Scale The Concept Of Mentoring
 - Supporting knowledge transfer and skill creation
 - Doing so at an organizational level
- They Create The Opportunity Of Building Knowledge Internally
 - Relying on and reinforcing the expertise that the organization possesses
- They Champion The Use Of Organizational Resources And Expertise
 - Skill development and knowledge transfer is supposed to be cheaper
 - Insights and impacts are supposed to be higher

Why Mentoring Programs Seem Like A Great Idea

- Mentoring Programs Are Inherently Practical
 - They are based within the organization
 - They rely on the expertise of staff who practically know how to get things done
- They Are A Direct Transfer Of Knowledge
 - People who want to learn interact directly with people who have knowledge and expertise
- They Are Intended To Be Relevant
 - Learning what actually gets done and what is known to work
 - Explaining and demonstrating “how things really work here”

What Mentoring Is Supposed To Do

- Mentoring As A Program Is A Form Of Organizational Learning
 - Creating knowledge, skills and capabilities
 - Building up the awareness and understanding of targeted staff
- It Is Intended To Promote Practical Understanding
 - Leverage the expertise of those who well understand a topic
 - Organically share and build up understanding in those with less experience
- The Learning Journey Is Guided By Someone That Knows The Topic And The Organization
 - Provide opportunities to practically adopt and apply new skills and abilities
 - Help to navigate the organization in doing so

What Mentors Get Out Of It

- An Opportunity To Contribute
 - Make a difference in the life of the organization
 - Support colleagues in building capabilities, competency and value
- Recognition Of Their Expertise
 - Direct acknowledgement of proficiency and credibility
 - Explicit demonstration of value to the organization
- Building A Legacy Of Understanding
 - Promote continued building of skills and expertise
 - Allow the organization to continue to thrive

What Participants Get Out Of It

- Opportunity To Learn And Grow
 - Learning skills that are directly related to the work that they do
 - Building their expertise, value and relevance
- Structured Time To Work With Senior Staff And Internal Experts
 - Creation of opportunities to interact with those with specialized understanding
 - Exposure to different perspectives and viewpoints that day-to-day work doesn't necessarily allow
- Guidance In Practically Getting Work Done
 - Not just knowledge and understanding
 - The opportunity to try out new skills and get direct feedback and support

What The Organization Gets Out Of It

- Mentoring Programs Are Intended To Support The Elusive Goal Of Knowledge Transfer
 - Leverage the understanding and expertise of senior employees
 - Bring up the capability and knowledge of more junior and intermediate staff
- What Gets Delivered Is Expected To Be Based On What Works In Practice
 - Knowledge that is directly relevant to the job
 - Practical understanding that can be used and applied
- Presumably More Cost Effective Than More Traditional And Formal Training
 - Utilizes resources that already exist within the organization



Why Mentoring Falls Flat

Not Everyone Should Be A Mentor

- Being Good At What You Do Is One Part Of The Criteria
 - Having developed significant knowledge and skill
 - Being competent at doing the kind of work that mentoring seeks to advance
- Transferring That Knowledge And Skill To Others Is A Whole Different Matter
 - Being able to communicate effectively
 - Awareness and empathy of how people are responding
 - Ability to connect and engage in a way that supports actual learning

Not Everyone Is As Good At Their Job As They Might Be

- Seniority Is Often Used As A Proxy For Skill Level
 - That doesn't necessarily always follow
- Those With The Most Expertise And Insight Are Often Closest To The Work
 - They engage with it daily
 - They see, experience, interact with and address the problems and issues
- Expertise Can Lapse Surprisingly Quickly
 - Particularly in fast-moving and rapidly-changing environments

Experts Are At The End Of A Long Pathway Of Learning

- They Might Know A Lot
 - Much of that knowledge is ingrained and tacit
- Experts Also Know Their Own Shortcuts
 - What they ignore and what they leave out
 - What they deal with as an exception
- There Are Many Potential Disconnects And Pitfalls Here
 - Being able to reconnect with the pathways that got them to that level of understanding
 - Acknowledging how formal understanding has evolved into less formal doing

Personal Challenges Of Mentors In Mentoring Programs

- Having The Confidence To Be A Mentor
 - Recognizing their own expertise and the value and scarcity of their skills
- Having Perspective Of How Their Skills Have Evolved
 - Appreciating the pathway that they have followed
 - Being able to support others in evolving their own capabilities
- Possessing Skills In Mentorship
 - Knowing how to be an effective mentor and transfer knowledge
- Being Able To Explain What They Do
 - Taking tacit knowledge and making it once again explicit and comprehensible
- Not Being Stuck In Ways Of Thinking Or Expectations Of How Progress Is Made
 - Presuming a linear path of learning that starts at a specific place and progresses from there
 - Being invested in others needing to pay their dues in the same way that they once did

Personal Challenges Of Participants In Mentoring Programs

- **Having A Willingness To Learn**
 - Being interested in the learning journey
 - Valuing the expertise of others and wanting to engage with them
- **Knowing What They Need To Work On**
 - Recognizing that there are gaps in knowledge and capabilities
 - Appreciating where those are and what they need to get better at
- **Valuing The Guidance**
 - Respecting and appreciating the expertise on offer
 - Willing to commit to learning from their mentor
- **Being Able To Meaningfully Apply What Is Learned**
 - Having the opportunity to receive feedback and continued encouragement
 - Having the space and time to work and engage in a different way

Cultural Challenges Of Mentoring Programs

- Actually Valuing The Learning Journey
 - Believing that learning and knowledge acquisition is an important investment
- Being Willing To Make Space For Learning To Happen
 - Valuing more than just whatever constitutes productive work
- Allowing For What It Takes To Apply What Is Learned
 - Recognizing that initial efforts will be slow and less effective
 - Allowing for participants to follow the learning curve
 - Being willing to create the space and time to experiment
 - Accepting that not all attempts at applying skills will be successful

Organizational Challenges Of Mentoring Programs

- Making It All About Work
 - Not valuing the learning journey and the investment in building skills
- Separating Mentoring From Performance Management
 - This is not—and should not—be code for management and supervision
- Getting Past Lip Service About The Value Of Mentoring
 - Getting past the busy-ness of now and willingly investing in future capabilities
 - Demonstrating commitment and follow-through within the program
- Reinforcing “This Is The Way It Has Always Been Done Here”
 - Presuming that organizational practices are equivalent to best practices
 - Not seeking or supporting external inputs and perspectives into building capabilities
 - Not using mentoring as one component of a larger learning journey



Building an Exceptional Mentoring Program

Be Clear About What You Are Trying To Do

- Clearly Define The Purpose And Objectives Of The Mentoring Program
 - What knowledge and expertise are you seeking to transfer and share?
 - What specific functions, processes or capabilities does this support?
 - What sources of expertise and understanding do you need to draw on?
 - Who are the categories or groups of staff that you are seeking to reach?
- This Is Like Any Other Project
 - Be clear about your objective
 - Have an outcome
 - Make sure you are clear about the relevant scope you are seeking to address

Know What Success Looks Like

- Be Clear About A Successful Result Will Look Like For Your Organization
- That Can Be Framed From Two Different Perspectives:
 - What is the knowledge and ability of senior resources that you want to capture?
 - What are you trying to build actual understanding of?
 - What are the factors that make your candidate mentors exceptional today?
 - What capabilities do they need to share in order to be successful in transferring knowledge?
 - What does optimal improvement look like for participants in the program?
 - What should they be able to do that they cannot accomplish now?
 - What are the full supports they will need to develop those capabilities?
 - What assignments and actions will help them in following the journey?
 - How will you know that they are performing at an optimal level?

Map Out The Journey You Seek To Follow

- Recognize That Mentoring Programs Are A Journey
 - You are trying to move staff from one level of understanding to another
 - You are relying on the advanced expertise of other staff to do that
- Define The Journey That Got People To That Level Of Desired Expertise
 - Identify the path that they followed
 - Think broadly about the experience, knowledge and skills gained
 - Identify the stages of evolution that exist, and what makes each stage unique
 - Consider the on-ramps and off-ramps that go along with each stage

Build An Approach That Is Universally Supported

- This Is The Big Point Of Departure
 - Mentoring programs are seen as pairing up individual mentors and participants
 - The presumption is that you are tapping into the expertise of that one person
- What Programs Should Be Trying To Build Is Consistently Better Capabilities
 - You aren't just trying to learn from one person how they work individually
 - You are trying to build broader organizational understanding of how things work overall
- The Core Of The Program Should Draw Broadly On The Expertise Of Many
 - As delivered, there will be individual insights, anecdotes and observations
 - You are optimally trying to create broad benefits from a wide range of inputs

Train Mentors In How To Effectively Mentor

- Being A Good Mentor Is Not Something That Necessarily Comes Naturally
 - It is a skill unto itself
 - Mentoring draws on its own variety of talent, ability and knowledge
- As A Core Part Of Mentoring Program Development, Consciously Build Your Mentoring Capabilities
 - Identify or develop a training program for those who will be mentors
 - Address and identify the competencies and skills to do this well
 - Treat this as its own practical capacity-building effort
 - This should include trial efforts and situations where they can model and practice the skills you need them to apply

Mentoring Within A Broader Program Of Development

- Mentoring Has Two Discrete But Complementary Goals
 - Transferring knowledge from experienced and expert staff
 - Developing skills and abilities of more inexperienced staff
- What This Encompasses Is Limited To What Is Known Within The Organization
 - The risk is that this, over time, becomes its own self-reinforcing echo chamber
 - “Because we’ve always done it this way”
- Mentoring Should Complement Broader Training And Skills Development Efforts
 - Seeking out and understanding practices that are applied elsewhere
 - Weighing and evaluating the merits of external approaches against internal practices
 - Providing guidance and direction on “this is how we want to work here”

Be Deliberate About Participants

- Select Participants Who Are Best Positioned To Be Successful
 - This is advice that works both ways
- Mentorship Is A Partnership
 - It requires mutual respect and appreciation in order to succeed
- Think Carefully About Who You Select For Your Mentoring Program
 - Particularly in its early stages, where you are seeking to demonstrate a positive impact
 - Identify mentors who are engaged, willing to share their expertise and have the potential to be able to do so well
 - Seek participants that are eager to learn, value developing their skills and aspire to continue to improve

Adapt To The Needs Of Each Participant

- We've Discussed The Value Of A Universal Journey
 - Each participant will be at a different stage of that journey
- Each Participant Will Have Different Formative Experiences
 - They will have their own experience of engaging with the work and the organization
 - Different aspects of learning will be more or less challenging for different people
- For Each Participant, View The Journey From Their Perspective
 - Recognize where they are, what they know and where they need to go
 - Identify the gaps to be filled in, and the remaining journey to be followed
 - Design their participation to allow them to successfully continue and complete



In Conclusion...

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- Mentoring Is A Conceptually Popular Approach To Development
 - It often gets confused with coaching, which is an altogether different proposition
 - There are many barriers to its successful adoption
- Mentoring Programs Are About Knowledge Transfer At Scale
 - Tapping into the understanding and ability of senior resources
 - Building up the capabilities of less experienced staff
- For Mentoring Programs To Be Effective, They Need To Be Designed
 - There needs to be clear understanding of what you are trying to accomplish
 - The program should be universally designed, drawing on multiple sources of input
 - The journey of participants in arriving at desired expertise and skill needs to be considered
 - Mentoring should be one part of a much larger learning conversation
- Successful Mentoring Requires Space And Time To Learn And Apply New Skills
 - Creating the opportunity for participants to use the skills they are learning
 - Providing the space and time required to attempt, to adapt and to fail along the way



Question & Answer Session



Thank You!

Questions For The Presenter?

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NASA Mentoring Programs 1/2

Agencywide at NASA

1. [Agencywide Mentoring Pilot for Engagement and Development \(AMPED\)](#)
Contact: Megan Moland, megan.o.moland@nasa.gov
2. [PM Bridges Mentoring Program](#)
Contact: Sabrina Paul, sabrina.paul@nasa.gov
3. [Systems Engineering Mentorship Program \(Window Closed\)](#)
Contact: Vickie Wood, victoria.wood@nasa.gov
4. [SMA Mentoring Program](#)
Contact: Colleen Canary, colleen.w.canary@nasa.gov
5. [NASA Next](#)
Contact: Kati Brown, kati.brown@nasa.gov

AFRC

[MERGE Mentoring Program](#)

Contact: Daniel Likins, daniel.t.likins@nasa.gov

ARC

[MERGE - Ames Mentoring Program](#)

Contact: Daniel Likins, daniel.t.likins@nasa.gov

GRC

1. [Shaping Professionals and Relating Knowledge \(SPARK\)](#)
Contact: Kathy Clark, kathy.m.clark@nasa.gov
2. [Technical Leadership Development Program \(TLDP\)](#)
Contact: Kathy Clark, kathy.m.clark@nasa.gov

GSFC

1. [Guidance and growth: Goddard mentoring program](#)
Contact: Stacy Husk, stacy.l.husk@NASA.gov

NASA Mentoring Programs 2/2

HQ

[Headquarters Modern Mentoring Program](#)

Contact: Angela McDonald, angela.mcdonald-1@nasa.gov

JSC

[Program Management Development Initiative](#)

Contact: Jason Nelson jason.r.nelson@nasa.gov

KSC

[NASA Connect](#)

Contact: Zahyra Lebron zahyra.y.lebron@nasa.gov

LaRC

1. [Mentoring Employees to Realize Goals and Experiences \(MERGE\)](#)

Contact: Parker Glass, parker.w.glass@nasa.gov

2. [New Hire Buddy System](#)

Contact: Vibhas Panchal, vibhas.s.panchal@nasa.gov

MSFC

[MERGE at Marshall](#)

Contact: Leilani Cooper, leilani.m.cooper@nasa.gov

SSC/NSSC

[SPARK](#)

Contact: Britton Fortenberry, britton.p.fortenberry@nasa.gov

Other Resources:

OCHCO

[Mentorship](#) page

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