

Skilled Trades Mentoring

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Mentoring is an investment in workers, rather than an expense. A mentor program is a strategic plan to cultivate and retain skilled craftworkers. This article describes such a program from the Michigan Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen, Local 9, Lansing, Michigan, with the assistance of Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan.

Various challenges are facing the skilled trades industries in the new millennium: changing demographics, retirement of the baby boomers, a projected skilled worker deficit and new entrants with little or no experience.¹ A mentor program is a strategic plan to cultivate and retain skilled craftworkers. Mentoring is a planned early intervention designed to provide timely instruction to mentees throughout their apprenticeship, to shorten the learning curve, reinforce positive work ethics and attitudes, and provide mentees with role models.

Mentors have a unique opportunity to profoundly influence someone's career and life. Steve Squires is the principal investigator for NASA's twin Mars Rovers and is also Carl Sagan's protégé. "Squires credits his mentors, Sagan and Joseph Veverka, chairman of Cornell's astronomy department, with helping him form an ability to quickly grasp the keys to complex problems."² Mentoring is that "better mousetrap" that captures the need of an apprentice for reliable training, the expectation of a contractor for a skilled and productive employee, and the goal of organized labor and an industry for a secure future through a consistently well-trained, highly skilled workforce.

To understand the potential of mentoring in the skilled trades, we will consider the nature of mentoring and how it is an investment in workers, rather than an ex-

pense; the concept of mentoring concepts; the roles of mentors and mentees; formal vs. informal mentoring programs; and the effects of mentoring on all the functions of human resource management (HRM). We then directly apply these concepts to the skilled trades through the Skilled Trades Mentoring Program being implemented by the Michigan Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (BAC) Joint Apprenticeship and Training Center (JATC) in Lansing, Michigan.

Mentoring: An Investment in Workers, Rather Than an Expense

Mentoring Concepts

The word *mentor* is Greek, and it means a trusted counselor or guide, a tutor or coach. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus, king of Ithaca, hired Mentor to work as a teacher and to care for his son while he was off fighting in the Trojan War. After the war, Telemachus went searching for his father, who was condemned to wander for ten years. Mentor's form and energy were thought to have led to Odysseus' return to power with his son.³ A mentor invests his or her energy in the development of another person and helps another find his or her way. Mentors invest in the quality of work life for others, and in turn, benefit themselves. Mentoring reenergizes.

An organization that invests in a men-

toring program recognizes the importance of investing in human development. The three factors of production are people, capital goods and procedures. These factors, through an open system, convert inputs to outputs designed to achieve desirable outcomes. The open systems concept recognizes that all organizations interact with their complex environments.⁴ Advances in one organization impact others. The human element in the skilled trades is critical. In many industries, the investment in machinery and capital goods can replace labor, but in the skilled trades this trade-off does not equate; technology cannot replace most workers.

If one mentor can make a difference in the development of one worker and improve the quality of work life for the two of them, is there potential for changing the work culture through investing in several mentors? Investing in mentors means investing in training and new procedures. Mentors need to consider their impact on new entrants. Mentors serve as role models not only for their technical expertise, but also for their work ethic and relationships with others.

Thus, the vision of mentoring in the long run is that "One mentor can make a difference, but 100 mentors can change an industry." This motto stands as the mission of a well-planned and implemented mentoring program. The Mentoring Program of Michigan BAC invests in

the training of mentors and mentees to improve the work culture and image of the masonry industry. This investment serves both management and organized labor; it can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of recruitment and lead to higher retention.

Roles of Mentors and Mentees

A mentor serves to constructively advise, teach, guide, coach, share information and be a loyal confidant. A mentor listens to and observes the mentee. A mentor represents skill, knowledge and accomplishment.

A mentor is nurturing and willing to mentor. In a formal mentoring program, mentor selection is critical. The criteria for a mentor constitute willingness and ability to serve as a mentor. A mentor must first want to serve in that role and see the potential of his or her leadership. A mentor is a leader, not a manager. The power of a mentor comes from expertise and the ability to work well with others and does not result from his or her position in the hierarchy of an organization. Overall, a mentor is a role model—Is this what we want the new employee or apprentice to be like?

A mentee listens, observes, asks the mentor for interpretation of events, learns multiple methods and accepts constructive criticism. The mentee assesses his or her own progress by being sensitive to the mentor. A mentee takes pride in workmanship and associates productivity with personal satisfaction. A mentee and mentor together realize that quality work is a long-term investment.

Both the mentor and mentee need training to have mutually shared expectations. This is the foundation of formal mentoring programs: mutually shared expectations.

Formal vs. Informal Mentoring Programs

Many people serve as mentors without a formal mentor program. And many may say that there is little need for an established mentor program—If a person wants to be a mentor, he or she will do so with or without a “program” in place. This has certainly been true in the skilled trades. However, the tradition of children following in their parents’ and grandparents’ vocational footsteps is becoming less likely. Thus, many new workers have

had little exposure to “what it is like to be a bricklayer or a tile setter.”

For example, a new apprentice at a job site might link up with a worker close by, simply because he is nearby, and that worker may not be the ideal model of productivity and/or positive work attitudes. A formal mentor program establishes mentoring procedures and officially recognizes mentors as professional leaders in the workplace.

A formal mentor program empowers mentors. If a person is less assertive, he or she may not seek out a role model or take on the responsibility of serving as one. “If it happens, it happens,” may be the attitude. The default should not be “chance”; thus, if a mentor is paired with a mentee, both expect the alliance to be productive. If the mentor and mentee have participated in mentor program training, then the expectations are mutual. The mentor and mentee training serves as part of orientation and initial training for the new worker/apprentice. The investment in human resources emphasizes the importance of people. It also recognizes that employee satisfaction is the most important ingredient in productivity and the catalyst of work cultures. Investment defines what is important. Workers feel important by knowing their development is an investment.

Mentoring and HRM

Although mentoring is directly involved with employee orientation and initial training, in the long run it affects all of the functions of human resource management (HRM). The functions of HRM are divided into three categories: (1) attracting, recruiting, screening/evaluating applicants and selecting employees; (2) orientating, training, developing and maintaining employees; and (3) managing employee separation.⁵ Employee orientation, training and development are most directly related to mentoring, but the long-range intent is that it will affect all of the functions—filtering upward to affect recruitment, screening and selection and filtering downward to affect maintaining employees. Maintaining workers includes wage and salary administration, collective bargaining, maintaining a motivational and safe workplace environment, managing diversity in the workplace, employee work performance evaluations and many other tasks.

Mentoring has the potential to directly affect the workplace environment. All of the HRM functions are interrelated. The long-term potential of mentoring can affect the image of an industry or a corporation within an industry. It can make a better workplace. As one mentor in training of Michigan BAC Local 9 said, “I just want better people to work with. I like my work, and I want to work with others who like their work.”

Skilled Trades Mentoring Program: Michigan BAC JATC in Lansing

Origin

As artisans in the trowel trades, it is imperative to effectively communicate to future journeyworkers the core values and the procedures of the trowel crafts. It is vital to understand the beliefs, values and experiences of workers of all ages. For example, how do Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1981) and Yers (born after 1982) learn, and how are they motivated? How do their backgrounds differ from baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and “traditionalists” (born before 1946)?⁶ Why are workplaces “different” today? What can be done to recruit, train and retain productive workers that take pride in their work? How can the masonry industry achieve a more positive workplace culture and improve its status?

Seeking answers to these questions was the impetus for the contractors and union trustees from the Michigan Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers of Local 9 in Lansing, Michigan to request proposals for a formal mentoring program in March 2001. Mentoring was, and is, envisioned as a collaborative tool that can be used to answer the stated questions and realize jointly desired outcomes: a productive, satisfied workforce in a positive workplace environment, leading to an improved professional industry image.

A professor of management from Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan was chosen to design and implement the program. The Michigan BAC Labor Management Trust Fund initially funded the BAC Skilled Trades Mentoring Program. In 2003, a coordinator/recruiter who was a bricklayer and union member for 15 years was hired for the mentoring program and for Michigan BAC Local 9. The intent was to gradually

move the management professor from the planning, implementation and followup and have a permanent coordinator with technical industry experience take over the program once it was “up and running.” This effective partnership of business and organized labor with academia has been realized.

Purpose

The purpose of the program is to improve productivity and worker satisfaction. Journeyworkers are prepared to understand the needs and expectations of new workers through mentor training. Mentors are positive role models at the jobsite to provide timely instruction so that mentees do not have to learn the costly “hard way”; guidance in identifying short- and long-term goals by focusing on learning outcomes; correction to prevent the formation of improper techniques that are unprofessional, counter-productive and difficult to reverse; and stress reduction for foremen who do not need the added responsibility of training apprentices.

Mentoring proves to new apprentices the concern for their success. This improves the image and attractiveness of the trowel trades, resulting in increased market share. Mentoring is a bridge that supports an apprentice to successfully transition from the training center to the jobsite. Mentoring promotes pride in workmanship, quality and job satisfaction.

Three Parts of the Program

The proposed program consisted of three phases: preassessment and development; implementation and delivery; and followup and evaluation for mentors, mentees, contractors and Michigan BAC Local 9.

Preassessment and Development. During preassessment and development, site visits and interviews were conducted with 18 journeymen, nominated by five contractors. The purpose of these interviews was to evaluate a candidate’s skill level, work ethic, attitude, aptitude to teach, view of the mentoring program and willingness to participate, and to receive program design input from journeymen and foremen. Existing mentoring programs were researched. The findings showed most formal programs are in administrative and information technology environments, some in manufacturing, some in the military such as the U.S. Coast Guard

and only a few in the skilled trades, mostly with restoration masonry. National mentoring organizations expressed a strong interest in the proposed Skilled Trades Mentoring Program.⁸

Implementation and Delivery. In August 2001, the Joint Labor/Management Task Force of Michigan BAC Local 9 established a formal mentoring program. To achieve the synergy of program development and implementation, 12 Local 9 journeymen and three Local 9 union trustees met for five days and helped to develop the procedures and documentation of the Mentoring Program. Procedures and guidelines include practices and forms for nominating and selecting mentors, qualifications and criteria for mentors, expected behaviors of mentees (titled “The Big Ten”) and coordinated mentor-mentee evaluation forms. These 15 people, the charter mentors, were the first to participate in mentor training. The delivery of training is a major part of implementation that results in a consistency of purpose and expectations.

A second team of 15 participated in mentor training in March 2002. They reviewed the procedures established by the charter mentors and made further suggestions. Two other classes were conducted in August 2003 and February 2004.

Mentor training consists of 32 to 40 hours of in-residence training. Participants learn about mentoring concepts; behavioral forces of mentoring in the skilled trades; the history of masonry, IMI and BAC; understanding individual differences (personality, perception, value systems and diversity); effective communication, with emphasis on listening; human motivation; and leadership as a mentor/coach. Participants also learn about the procedures of the Michigan BAC Mentoring Program. Current videos and experiential exercises are used on all training topics. Shirts, lunch coolers, hats and jackets with the Michigan BAC Local 9 mentoring logo are given to mentors during and following training. Pens, pencils and “Mason Mentors candies” (M&Ms, with dispensers) promote the program and serve as reminders of the program purpose.

Mentor training in communications and work relationships includes the five foundations for improving work relationships: give clear and complete instructions; communicate to receive feedback;

give credit when due; involve others; maintain an open mind and tone of inquiry, rather than telling; and use situational judgment. Participants learn and practice these principles. Case studies are used to present more realistic workplace situations.

Prior to embarking upon their apprenticeship, preapprentices spend four hours at the school in mentee training. This training consists of mentoring concepts; mentoring procedures for Michigan BAC; the correlation between productivity, quality and job satisfaction; mentoring expectations; the “Big Ten” expected behaviors of a mentee; and communication skills.

Evaluation and Feedback. In January 2002 over 80 foremen and contractors with Michigan BAC Local 9 met for two half-day sessions to discuss the program, and again, to achieve a consistency of purpose and an understanding of expectations. Their input was extremely valuable.

From 2001 to present, the development of the mentoring program has been documented with brochures, articles published in journal and trade publications, and newsletters. Field followup and coordination are ongoing to provide feedback and program evaluation. Mentor reunion meetings are planned on at least an annual basis beginning in 2004. A book, *Skilled-Trades Mentoring*, is in process.

Present Status

Four mentor training programs have served 53 journeyworkers and trustees; 33 mentors had been trained at the end of 2003, but a February 2004 class raised that number to 46 in three crafts: bricklaying; pointing, cleaning and caulking; and concrete finishing. The program has moved from five charter contractors to a total of 12. The goal is to reach 100 mentors with increased contractor participation, and many contractors have expressed that desire. By the end of 2003 there were 17 mentor/mentee connections.

Here is an example of the success stories that are building the mentoring culture:

Our company became involved in the mentoring process on the ground floor. We understood that it was a good idea, but did not fully realize what it could do for us. However, one case in particular drove home how important mentoring

can be. We had an apprentice fresh out of the pre-apprentice training school who was doing an excellent job for us. While working for us he began to develop problems to the point I had three foremen request that he be transferred to a different job. We noticed a declining work ethic: poor production, long breaks, and early quitting time. We moved him to a different project; however, the prior problems still continued. He also started coming in late and missing days. We moved him one more time, but the results were the same. It had progressed to the point that my Superintendent also was considering letting him go. It was decided that before dismissing him we would match him up with one of the mentors who had just been trained. The results were more than we could have hoped for. After a short time we noticed the number of missed days and times late had dramatically decreased. As he continued with the mentor all of the problems had greatly improved, if not disappeared. After a few months my Superintendent was now saying he would take him on any job.⁹

A formal mentoring program is an investment in the future of organized labor, management and industry, not an expense. Through mentoring, a proactive role is assumed in shaping the future, rather than “letting the chips fall where they may.” The responsibility to develop skilled craftworkers that take pride in a tradition of excellence and are prepared to be the industry leaders of tomorrow rests squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of today.

One mentor can make a difference, but 100 mentors can change an industry. **B&C**

Endnotes

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