Less-experienced individuals learn and grow faster under the tutelage of a more seasoned professional. The more seasoned professionals have renewed enthusiasm for their careers. This adds up to improved recruitment, retention and promotion—and the bottom line—for your organization.

Here's what you need to know to establish an effective mentoring program in your organization.

**Getting started**

Before you can find two individuals who fit the bill for an effective mentoring partnership, it's crucial to realize what mentoring is and is not. In its most basic form, a mentoring relationship is a means by which mentorees can develop their professional skills through the guidance, counsel and experiences of a mentor. Mentors gain a sense of purpose, accomplishment and contribution to the organization. In the end, mentoring expands the knowledge, skill, energy and creativity of both parties.

Mentoring is not designed to teach a mentoree basic skills, pacify a disgruntled employee, or overcome inadequate hiring practices. It should not be viewed by either party as something that *must* be done to retain a current position, garner a favorable review or avoid discipline. Rather, it should be an honor for both parties involved.

**Example #1:** Callie knows she is skating on thin ice with her department manager because of a tardiness problem. In the hopes of getting into her manager's good graces, and, thus, skirting further disciplinary measures for her tardies, she agrees to enter into a mentoring partnership with her immediate supervisor. Callie's motivations for engaging in the program are insincere. The partnership is, therefore, likely to fail before it even starts.

**Example #2:** Shania, who is also suffering from a tardiness problem, welcomes the chance to mentor with her immediate supervisor. She hopes to learn how to better manage her time during the workday so she doesn't have to stay late. Not staying late will help Shania complete her after-work responsibilities in a more timely manner, allowing her to get to bed at a reasonable hour and, hopefully, wake up without a problem the next morning.

It's important to note that in both examples, the immediate supervisor has to want to accept the role as mentor. If the supervisor is merely doing it to appease the department manager, the partnership will falter, no matter how committed the mentoree is.

A clear understanding of what mentoring means is only the first step. Here's what else you need to do to establish a successful program:
1. Determine whether the organizational climate would support a mentoring program. Is business good? Are you hiring, or at least not laying off employees? Is there interest in developing and learning?

2. Get support from top brass. Their enthusiasm can make all the difference. To get them on board, convince them of the payoff, such as:

   - Mentorees can boost performance by learning technical and leadership skills more quickly; building confidence; making contacts; and acclimating to the company, its climate, and culture faster.
   - Mentors benefit from taking a teaching or leadership role, sparking enthusiasm for a job that has become routine.
   - Mentoring can ensure that the organization retains the wisdom and experience of older employees as they retire.
   - Mentoring can uncover hidden potential in employees, improve the selection of employees for advancement, and increase job satisfaction and loyalty.

3. Consider the time factor. Can participants spare the time to get together? Does HR have the time to periodically monitor mentoring relationships? Are there individuals available to answer questions and keep the program fresh over time? Establish specific time frames for formal mentoring relationships. Optimal: at least six months to a year.

4. Set a budget. You can find mentoring information for free or at a low cost online and from professional sources.

5. Allow at least six months to plan the program and to encourage buy-in. While HR does the footwork, create a task force of managers who are enthusiastic about mentoring.

6. Consider how you will introduce the program and communicate the details (e-mails, posters, payroll stuffers, etc.).

7. To help guarantee a successful launch, start small, e.g., orienting new hires. Later, you can expand the program to career development for all employees.

**How formal to go?**

A formal program is one in which HR matches mentors and mentorees. Such a program requires a great deal of structure. The program must:

1. have a formal application process;
2. screen, select, and match participants;
3. establish clear roles for mentors and mentorees;
4. determine competencies for mentorees to focus on;
5. offer formalized training;
6. schedule ongoing activities; and
7. monitor participants.

If a formal program doesn't fit into your company's culture, don't despair. You don't need a formal program in place to enjoy the benefits of employee mentoring. All you need are two individuals (a supervisor and an
employee, a new hire and a veteran co-worker, etc.) committed to the process and a way to partner up interested parties. Just be sure to designate someone in HR to field any questions that may arise.

**What to look for in participants**

Asking for volunteers is probably the most common way to identify those interested in being a mentor. Not everyone who wants to be a mentor, however, is cut out for the job. Willingness is only one necessary characteristic. Whether you are considering a mentoring role yourself or planning to suggest that a member of your management team assumes the role, look for:

- a genuine interest in mentoring;
- strong interpersonal skills, including superb listening, feedback, and coaching skills;
- organizational knowledge, including knowledge of the company's vision, goals, mission, culture, policies, and programs;
- professional knowledge, with a network of resources inside and outside of the organization;
- the ability to keep confidential information confidential; and
- the ability to lead with patience and without being overly domineering or controlling.

Employees seeking a mentoring relationship may be at different stages of their careers — from entry level to senior management. Regardless of how varied their reasons are for wanting to be mentored, the ideal charge is:

- genuinely interested in personal and professional growth;
- an active listener;
- open to feedback, both positive and negative;
- committed to learning;
- willing to take risks; and
- self-disciplined.

**What can derail the partnership and how to get it back on track**

Even the seemingly best paired mentors and mentorees can hit some roadblocks. Here are six of the most common obstacles to successful mentoring partnerships, with suggestions for overcoming them.

1. **Mismatched teaching/learning styles.** New hire Christian is a hands-on learner. But his mentor prefers to verbally explain how the company's computer system works as he demonstrates his explanations. While the mentor provides step-by-step instructions and Christian watches his every move and takes notes, Christian gets frustrated when he sits down at the computer and can't put what he learned into action. Despite these growing frustrations, he hesitates to speak up for fear of angering his mentor and being labeled a complainer.

   **Suggestions:** At the start of a mentoring relationship, mentors and mentorees need to discuss how each best teaches and learns, respectively. This shouldn't be difficult, as most adults are well aware of their teaching and/or learning styles. If these styles mesh, great. If they don't, mentors and mentorees need to find a compromise that works for them.

   Also, mentors and mentorees need to make a pact to speak up as soon as frustrations arise. Frustrations need to be dealt with immediately so as not to slowly erode the relationship to the oblivion of the other party.

2. **Hurt feelings.** As soon as the words leave his mouth, Charlie wishes he can take them back. He knows his mentee is working hard to overcome performance problems. When he told her that processing customer invoices should be easy "even for you," he meant because she didn't have much prior experience, but saw in her eyes that she took that to mean because she wasn't as good a performer as other employees. Instead of taking the time to explain what he meant, Charlie immediately dives into a discussion about customer orders.

   **Suggestions:** At the start of a mentoring relationship, mentors and mentorees need to discuss how each best teaches and learns, respectively. This shouldn't be difficult, as most adults are well aware of their teaching and/or learning styles. If these styles mesh, great. If they don't, mentors and mentorees need to find a compromise that works for them.
Suggestions: If it's apparent that one party offended the other, whether intentionally or not, the offending party should address the situation immediately. Hearing the words "I'm sorry" goes a long way toward assuaging hurt feelings and getting the mentoring relationship back on track.

3. Resentment. The more newly-promoted Arnold interacts with his mentor, the more he starts to resent having someone 20 years his junior "tell him what to do." So he starts blowing off mentoring sessions.

Suggestions: Resentment is a personal hang-up that's difficult to detect at the outset of a mentoring relationship. As soon as mentorees start to pull away from the partnership, mentors should address the situation. Sometimes, talking helps to flesh out feelings of resentment. For example, Arnold gains some respect for his mentor after learning that she worked her way up the company ladder by being mentored herself. Arnold doesn't see her as the "know-it-all" he once assumed her to be.

Other times, however, resentment cannot be overcome. In such cases, put an end to the mentoring relationship as soon as possible. Continuing will only be a disservice to both parties involved.

4. Time. It doesn't seem like there are enough hours in the day for Vicky to get everything done, let alone mentor an employee having discipline problems. But she knows the employee has the potential to be an outstanding performer and wants to help him reach his potential. Unfortunately, Vicky spends more time rescheduling mentoring sessions she had to cancel than actually mentoring the employee.

Suggestions: Before entering into a mentoring partnership, both individuals need to honestly assess their work schedules. They need to make sure that their schedules are flexible enough to allow them to meet on a regular basis. Some meetings might be as long as an hour. Others might be as short as 10 minutes. Regardless of the length of individual meetings, both parties need to have the time necessary to cultivate the relationship.

5. Unrealistic expectations. Carney is thrilled to have the department manager mentor her. She assumes that this is her ticket up the organizational ranks. Plus, she knows her manager is well-known in the medical community and expects her relationship with him to propel her into the medical community spotlight. Carney grows restless, though, when neither of her expectations comes to fruition.

Suggestions: It's crucial for mentors and mentorees to set common goals and expectations at the beginning of the relationship. Without common goals, mentoring is worthless. Goals need to be reached mutually by both parties.

6. Neglect. Paul and his mentor start off with a bang. Within weeks, his performance is on the rise. Seeing signs of improvement, Paul's mentor decides to scale back on mentoring sessions. As the weeks wear on, the men meet less and less frequently, even though Paul still hasn't achieved his performance goals.

Suggestions: Mentoring relationships must be nurtured. That's not to say they must go on indefinitely. But, at the very least, they should continue until all agreed upon goals are achieved. Paul's mentor should continue with regular meetings until Paul achieves and sustains his performance goals.

Measuring success

Whenever you implement a new program or practice, no matter how formal or informal, it's wise to measure its success. When measuring the success of mentoring programs, many employers do not focus on the right data.

The problem: Only asking participants about satisfaction.

The solution: Measuring more meaningful data, e.g., knowledge and skills acquired; mentorees' career progress (e.g., promotions, raises, and career decisions); retention.
Establish a baseline measure at the program's beginning; then measure changes at the end. Have participants turn in reports on what they did together, what they learned, and suggestions for improvements. Also, ask mentorees' supervisors how specifically their performance has improved.

**Final note:** Even though mentoring is generally considered a perk, managers who deny employees mentoring or other advancement opportunities may raise a discrimination or retaliation red flag.