

Secrets of a mentor to future CEOs

In his 15 years as CEO of ICICI Bank, K.V. Kamath says he spent 30% of his time mentoring employees. The 65-year-old native of India views mentoring as a natural part of communicating with high-potential subordinates.

When Kamath became the bank's CEO in 1996, he inherited a pool of young managers who lacked the seasoning to step into senior roles.

"I had to watch for talent and once I spotted it, provide them opportunities to grow," Kamath says. "Once they had reached a senior level, I then needed to rotate them through different areas so their talents were rounded."

For Kamath, mentoring involves guiding people to set more ambitious goals. He likes to give mentees hard-to-reach targets along with the confidence to attain them.

One of his protégés, Shikha Sharma, recalls that Kamath wanted her to help grow an ICICI business unit to become the dominant market leader. Sharma admits she never would have dreamed up such an audacious goal on her own—much less achieve it. She's now CEO of Axis Bank in India. Mentoring typically involves doling out lots of advice. But Kamath doesn't give much feedback; instead, he signals satisfaction by rotating the individual through a series of increasingly high-profile assignments.

Kamath seeks to limit his working relationship with mentees. He holds short, business-oriented meetings with them. He prefers to remain distant rather than forge personal bonds.

"I don't believe a mentor and mentee should have a confiding relationship," he explains. "If you concern yourself with their personal life, the relationship can get unmanageable."

Finally, Kamath likes to see mentees show initiative. When one of them made bold procedural changes in one of ICICI's regional business units, Kamath asked, "Who gave you permission to make such big moves?" When the mentee replied, "No one. I decided on my own," Kamath said, "That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

— Adapted from "[What makes KV Kamath India Inc.'s most prolific CEO guru](#)," Dibeyendu Ganguly.