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Cross-Cultural Connections

By Kathryn Tyler

October Issue 2007 | HR Magazine

Though cross-cultural and cross-gender mentoring programs have been around for years, many companies are rejuvenating them in light of the changing demographics of their workforces.

The Hispanic population is now the largest minority in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And despite many gains in the workplace by minorities and women, both groups are still underrepresented in the upper ranks of corporate America. Studies show that mentors can help change those statistics.

Establishing support for cross-cultural mentoring programs can be difficult, however. Mentoring programs that target minority employee groups face hurdles such as finding mentors willing to participate, training participants about cultural differences and guiding pairs in how to bridge the gaps between cultures.

Proven strategies can overcome these hurdles, and the results -- a more loyal workforce where minority and female workers move up the ranks -- are well worth HR professionals' efforts.

The Need

Relying on informal mentoring hasn't proved successful because of basic human behavior, experts say. People tend to seek mentors and mentees who look like them. With far fewer minorities and women than white men occupying the upper ranks of management, companies need formal mentorships to reach minority groups and female participants.

"Subconsciously, a white male is likely to seek out a younger version of himself to mentor," explains Belle Rose Ragins, Ph.D., professor of HR management at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. "It's important to have formal mentoring because of the barriers women and people of color face in getting informal mentors."

According to Catalyst, a nonprofit research firm in New York, "having a mentor is key to career success, yet many women in today's workforce are navigating the corporate path alone."

"When you're part of a minority group, often you don't know the networks to help you advance or how to get yourself in front of the people who make decisions," says Susan Sweetser, vice president of Focus Markets, a group within MassMutual Financial Group, a financial protection, accumulation and income management company in Springfield, Mass.

Many formal mentoring programs grow out of employee resource groups already established within companies. This was the case at the Chubb Corp., a group of insurance companies with 10,800 employees worldwide. Its formal mentoring program, "Reach Up, Reach Out, Reach Down," grew out of the Women's Development Council employee resource group.

"We were looking to get [more] women into the pipeline," says Merrily Riesebeck, a vice president of information technology at Chubb. The program began with 15 mentor-mentee pairs and now has 50, she says. "The mentors are VPs and senior VPs, an influential group of women. Our target audience is women, but we also have a focus on women of color."

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J.H. Cohn LLP, an independent accounting and consulting firm in Roseland, N.J., found the need for mentoring greatest among its female professionals. At the start of its formal mentoring program in 2001, there were no women among the firm's partners, directors and senior managers. Now, 36 of the 223 people in those leadership positions are women. "They're steadily rising through the ranks and have come to rely on the healthy outlet provided by a mentoring relationship to navigate not just the office but also what comes after their 9-to-5 day," says Lynn Lagomarsino, partner and director of J.H. Cohn's Women's Initiative.

The Business Case

To secure the executive team's buy-in for cross-cultural mentoring programs, it's important to make a business case for them and not rely solely on the rationale that a diverse mentoring program is socially responsible. The strongest business case is the increased purchasing power of various growing ethnicities in the United States and the potential for new markets within those cultures.

For example, a study at the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia shows an estimated 413 percent increase in Latino buying power in the United States from 1990 to 2010, higher than the growth rate for any other race or ethnicity.

"The more diversified your network, the more opportunities you have to be introduced to new markets you haven't thought about entering and the more information you can get about how to [position] future products," says Pegine Echevarria, president and chief executive officer of Team Pegine, a diversity-focused motivational speaking company in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

"It's a way to broaden people's creative ability to seek new products, new ideas of cost savings and ways of interacting with people different from themselves," Echevarria adds. "By interacting with people not like you, you're expanding your market. Diversity comes back to good business."

Recruiting Mentors

The biggest problem with almost any mentoring program is a lack of good mentors. "Not everyone who volunteers is going to be a good mentor," Ragins says, adding that a good mentor listens well, has good communication skills, is able to empower his or her protege, and is empathetic, among other traits. To find appropriate mentors, "there has to be a screening process. If you don't have a pool of good mentors, your program isn't going to be effective."

Keith Ayers, president of Integro Leadership Institute in West Chester, Pa., agrees. "The challenge for the HR professional is to get the commitment from the senior executives" to become mentors, he says. "Most people are willing. If they push back initially, it's because they don't have the skills. Once they have the skills, they come on board and see the benefits."

HR professionals who have a shortage of mentors must pick up the phone and start asking leaders to become mentors. Most report little resistance from executives when they are asked directly.

However, even if your entire executive team participates, you may not have enough mentors to meet demand. "Many fe-

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male executives and executives of color are overloaded with informal-mentoring requests," Ragins says. "You may want to consider group mentoring, which essentially offers support groups of women and people of color."

Group mentoring also helps alleviate the overwhelming demand on minority executives by having one mentor for several mentees. That was the solution for telecommunications company Sprint.

In 2006, Sprint started a trial formal cross-cultural mentoring program with 50 employees at its headquarters in Overland Park, Kan. Although open to all employees, it targeted minority groups. It was so successful that the company launched the program at three locations during 2007. "The demand was overwhelming," says Tammy Edwards, director of inclusion and diversity, who became a mentor to several employees.

The 2007 program had 500 participants. "The mentee side was so large that each mentor is paired with up to five mentees," says Edwards.

For many companies, however, a shortage of mentors may be only temporary. "The proteges of today will be the mentors of tomorrow," predicts Ragins.

Making a Match

Matching becomes crucial in any mentoring program, but when you have a cross-cultural program, you have two more elements to consider: race and gender. Determine what your mentees seek from the relationships before matching them.

"Think about [and ask] what the proteges need," Ragins advises. "If, for example, the program is aimed at retention, some women and people of color would [benefit from] mentors who are of the same race and gender. If the program is aimed at advancement, then it's more important to hook them up with powerful people in the organization, who are usually white males."

Julie Cookson, PHR, senior vice president of human resources at Scripps Networks, a media company based in Knoxville, Tenn., that owns several national cable TV networks, agrees. "A woman doesn't always want to be mentored by another woman. A man can give you insight into a male boardroom that a woman can't," she says. "I've had minorities in the company tell me, 'I don't need any help networking with [executives of my race]. I'd like a partnership with someone who brings a different skill set and observations.'"

Cookson also recommends looking at "who would benefit most from this program. For us, we're looking at managers, directors or very green VPs as mentees," she says. Two years ago, Scripps Networks instituted a formal mentoring program with seven pairs. This year, the program has 11 pairs.

"All the mentees are female and/or minority employees," Cookson says. "The company pairs these individuals with senior vice presidents or executive vice presidents in different departments."

Cookson herself mentors Desiree Rollins, a divisional marketing director who is black.

Rollins works in the Los Angeles satellite office and wants an inside view of the Knoxville headquarters. "The biggest benefit was the opportunity to develop a relationship with a senior officer," she says. "I gained a better understanding of the

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operations of the company. I learned senior managers have similar challenges to [those of] field and middle management personnel.”

Offering a Choice

HR professionals may want to give mentees a choice of mentors. Carolyn D’Anna, partner and managing director of human resources at J.H. Cohn, says, “We allow the mentee to select his or her own mentor, which enables them to feel comfortable and encourages them to build a sustained relationship.”

However, it’s important for participants to stretch their comfort zones, advises Michael Holmes, director of strategic talent management and global diversity leadership at Pitney Bowes Inc., a mail technology company in Stamford, Conn., with 35,000 employees worldwide.

“Begin with the mentees and what they need most, without deferring to their comfort levels automatically,” says Holmes. “Most organizations will try to do matching by generation, gender and race. Think outside of the box. Try to get as much matching [as possible] across all of the various aspects of diversity, but be sensitive to the needs of the mentees and mentors.”

Holmes gives an example of a senior-level white female mentoring a junior-level black male.

“These two are learning so many things about how to communicate with people of different races and generations,” he says. “She is learning a lot about Generation Y, including avoiding treating him as she does her son, who is about his age. The young man is becoming better at communicating his ideas with confidence.”

Edwards has had a similar experience with one of her mentees, a Latina single mother. “What I’ve learned from her is the value of patience and how to truly balance work and life,” she says, adding that her mentee has given her insights into how she is perceived. “She says I come across as rushed sometimes. That was very enlightening.”

Training

All participants should receive cross-cultural training in addition to training on the roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees. Many companies have diversity training, but it’s important to discuss how this relates to and affects a mentoring relationship.

Unfortunately, “when you talk about differences [between cultures], people are afraid of stereotyping,” says Beth Clark, CEO and president of Allegro Training and Consulting, a diversity and relationship company in Lawrence, Kan. Teaching mentors and mentees about cultural differences isn’t stereotyping as long as it is presented in a neutral way and isn’t used to limit opportunities. “Just as there are generational differences between baby boomers and millennials, there are differences between cultures,” she says. “People need to get over their fear of talking about race and [gender] in a way that illustrates potentially tangible differences.”

Why? There are conscious and unconscious cultural belief systems that may interfere with mentoring, Clark says. For instance, “African-Americans often see the concept of mentoring as selling out. ‘I want to make it on my merit, my numbers,

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[not who I know].’ Women and Latinos tend to have similar belief systems around networking and mentoring -- that [they are] phony. Culturally, Latinos and women are socialized that we build relationships for their own sake, not to help them advance.”

Ragins agrees: “A white male mentor with an Asian protege may give the advice: ‘You’re just going to have to toot your own horn.’ But while that advice may work for the white male, it may go against the cultural norm for many Asians; tooting your own horn may be viewed as rude and inappropriate in many cultures.”

Moreover, Clark says, you should “make sure you put a cross-cultural piece into the training for both the mentors and the proteges. The proteges have to learn the multicultural information, too, including training on the white male cultural belief system.”

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