Creating and Sustaining the High Performance Mentoring Culture

Willbur, J.

The Leadership Mentoring Institute

The Leadership Mentoring Institute has successfully assisted in setting up and conducting mentoring programs in over 1000 schools and in several Fortune 500 organizations including S.C. Johnson, KPIT Cummins and The ServiceMaster Corporation. In addition, with Delta Management Group we have also set up executive mentoring practices in several large health care institutions and university medical centers. We have observed that there are cultures, or organizational personalities, that are more amenable to effective mentoring. They engage in specific practices and attract and develop certain types of leaders we call mentor leaders. In this paper we will define mentor leaders and also describe the types of cultures that attract and sustain mentors and mentoring programs. The research cited will be mainly from the organizational development field, using recent works such as Great by Choice using Stanford's research on effective organizations including SW Airlines and Intel, as well as research on neuroplasticity from the social sciences. Participants will be able to learn traits of effective mentor leaders, characteristics of mentor friendly high performance cultures, and ways they can translate these findings into settings beyond business or healthcare. We will also discuss ways to encourage mentors and mentoring in your current setting and how to go about making changes into a more mentor friendly, high performance culture. The paper will use both quantitative and qualitative research results as well as anecdotal observations from our over 30 years of mentoring experience.

In recent years there have been several substantive research efforts by major universities to discover and define the elements of highly effective organizations. While many factors have been identified, two powerful themes run consistently throughout the findings. Attracting and retaining good people is critical, but having an adaptive high performance culture to nurture them is essential. For example, John Kotter and James Heskett of Harvard Business School in their book Corporate Culture and Performance (1992) used an analytical research approach to contrast organizations with either strong or weak cultures and high or low performance. Their research indicated that the successful strong culture and high performance organizations were distinguished by strong leadership, people development and were adaptive to rapidly changing highly competitive environments. These performance-enhancing cultures had norms and values that helped them change and were articulated as an organizational vision, a business strategy, a philosophy or a statement of values. They noted that mentoring by older members encouraged the younger members to take on the values of the organization.

Other research based books followed, all supporting the concepts that building high performance cultures and encouraging people development were intertwined in highly successful organizations. James Collins and Jerry Porras and their research team at Stanford University described in Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies (1994) how the high performing companies they identified had carefully articulated vision statements and three to five key values usually linked to performance and people. (2). Jim Collins then expanded on these research based ideas in Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't (2001). His Stanford team conducted a comparison study looking at the differences between great companies and merely good companies. The good to great companies were defined as those who had previously been unremarkable, but then accelerated and sustained a high level of performance over 15 years. The good companies in contrast were in the same markets facing the same conditions, and indeed outperformed the general market over the same time span, but in no way could their results compare to the great company's performance. What made the difference between the good and great companies? There were seven factors cited, but two were crucial in getting the companies started to greatness. The first was the concept of level five leadership. These level five leaders behave as follows. They:

- Model a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will
- Display a compelling modesty, are self-effacing and understated.
- Attribute success to factors other than themselves
- Display a workmanlike diligence—more plow horse than show horse.
- Set up their successors for even greater success.

This is quite a contrast to the high-flyer superstars so often highlighted as great leaders by our celebrity focused media. As a matter of fact, most of the leaders of the great companies were not household names, and only a few had books written about them. What is really remarkable about these Level 5 leaders is that they typify what Tony Dungy, former Super Bowl winning coach of Indianapolis Colts fame, has come to call the mentor leader. While he spends a great deal of time describing the mentor leader, I think we can summarize for our purposes three major aspects that really differentiate this type of level five mentor leader from the rest.

- It is really not about them. They lead to add value to the lives of those they lead. They do every thing they can to benefit those they lead. They look for every opportunity to make a significant impact. They lead by example.
- They take a long-term perspective. They know an organization must get results to survive, but they also know that building and developing people for the long-run means tolerating some mistakes.
- Mentor leaders are focused on mentoring leaders who develop other mentor leaders. It is the ongoing legacy they are concerned about. (Dungy & Whitaker, 2010)

The second factor the Collins and the Stanford team found essential to starting the rise from being good to great was stated as follows: "We expected that good-to-great leaders would begin by setting a new vision and strategy. We found instead that they first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and then they figured out where to drive it. The old adage 'people are your most important asset' turns out to be wrong. People are not your most important asset. The right people are." (Collins, 2001, p.13)

Collins and his research team have been responsible for many other research-based books. His latest, written with Morten Hansen of U.C. Berkeley, is Great by Choice (2010). This was another comparison study that looked at what he team called "10Xers" because they built and maintained organizations that beat their industries averages by at least ten times over a 15 year period. There is a very interesting statement towards the end of the book. "This research project began with the premise that we live in an environment of chaos and uncertainty. But the environment doesn't determine why some companies thrive in chaos and others don't. People do….People lead. People build teams. People build organizations. People build cultures. People exemplify values, pursue purpose, and achieve big hairy audacious goals. Of all the luck we can get, people luck—the luck of finding the right mentor, partner, teammate, leader, friend—is one of the most important." (Collins & Hansen, 2010, p.161) Probably one of the best examples of this strong people orientation is provided by Southwest Airlines, one of the most improbable sustained success stories in American business. In an overregulated, highly competitive, big company dominated market, Southwest has prospered and grown. They are on almost every list of great companies. They unabashedly proclaim that people are the key. "The company believes that employees come first. When the systems, structure, policies, procedures, and practices of an organization are designed and lived out so that employees genuinely feel that they come first, trust is the result. Southwest employees trust the company and love its leadership, so they are not skeptical or apprehensive when management says, 'do whatever you think is right.'"(7) Without trust people can't be influenced to follow your vision. Without a vision the people are soon lost, to paraphrase an old proverb.

Getting the right people and developing them in a high performance culture appears from the research to be a critical element in organizational success. That mentoring plays a key role in this process has been known for years. The early AT&T studies of Berlew and Hall (1966) compellingly demonstrated that during a manager's early years in an organization they can be strongly influenced by mentors' expectations and that this is critical in determining their future performance and career success. (8) The great management guru Peter Drucker shared early on his experiences with the Mitsui Corporation of Japan, noting that it is one of the oldest (founded in 1637) and largest corporations in the world. He claimed that in over 300 years of business life they had never had a chief executive who was not both an outstanding person and a powerful leader. How was this accomplished? Both Japanese sources and analysis by Drucker concluded the same thing. They had a unique 'Godfather" mentoring system. In this system every new manager is assigned a godparent who is never a direct supervisor and seldom a member of upper management. For the first ten years of the new manager's career, the godparent is expected to be close contact with his godchild. The godparent is expected to know the young manager better than anyone else and be available at any time to provide him or her with unbiased counsel and even discipline if necessary. The godparent's responsibility is career guidance for the young manager. His motivation, besides hopefully an altruistic motive of helping

a young manager, is that no one makes it to the top of Mitsui without having proven they can develop other people. When they reach the top they also have a core network of godchildren to help them succeed. (9)

What are the benefits of having a high performance mentoring culture? Recent research has indicated that mentoring produces a strong commitment from people, creating greater satisfaction with work, and making them less likely to leave the organization. Since turnover costs can be staggering such a benefit is very crucial. (10) It has also been shown that mentoring can help leaders teach the new employee the "ropes", transferring personal and organizational values to them. It puts action into a philosophy of leadership succession. (11)

In an interesting twist, a recent review of the research by Hester and Setzer indicates that organizational culture is a leading determinant of mentoring success. "In most conventional organizations information flows vertically, usually from top to bottom. Yet for creative entrepreneurship to emerge there need to be professional networks and informal exchanges of ideas."(12) If a culture encourages and nurtures such sharing of information it can be a source of great competitive advantage. Other researchers have pointed out that horizontal interaction is crucial to free flowing of ideas. Mentoring could thus be looked upon in their words as a "culture of collaboration" encouraging "knowledge spillovers" and the overlapping of minds. (13)

What should a high performance mentoring culture look like? In a study by The Center for Creative Leadership (14) it is pointed out that effective mentoring programs have the following properties:

- They have strong organizational support. Top management is involved and adequate financial and human resources are provided. Mentoring is seen as part of the larger business strategy.
- There is clarity of purpose, expectations, and roles. Mentors and protégés have realistic expectations. Program outcomes are clearly articulated.
- Participation is voluntary. Mentees are involved in the selection of mentors and mentors are involved in the selection of protégés.
- Careful selection and matching procedures are followed. Mentors are selected carefully based on competence, time, position, skills in developing others, etc.
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation is conducted. The program evaluation utilizes multiple criteria. Results are measured against objectives and goals. Both short-term and long-term criteria are analyzed.

There is no doubt effective high performance mentoring cultures need top executive buy- in. Mentoring efforts can't just be flavor-of-the-day, but must be seen as well funded, strongly supported, strategically valuable programs. Leaders must walk the talk, demonstrating that you can't be a leader unless you are a learner.

Before the best companies begin to hire people they start with a definite end in mind. I call this a talent template. (15) In his book How the Mighty Have Fallen Jim Collins elaborates on what the right people in the right seats look like. As we discussed earlier, he identified this as a key success strategy in Good to Great. The six elements that he looks for to get the right people in the right seats on the bus are as follows:

1. The right people will fit with the company's core values.
2. The right people don't need to be tightly managed.
3. The right people recognize they don't have jobs they have responsibilities.
4. The right people fulfill their commitments.
5. The right people are passionate about the company and its work.
6. The right people display "window and mirror" maturity. When something goes well they look out a window and give others credit. When things go wrong they look in the mirror and ask how can I do it better? (16)

Southwest Airlines has a definite talent template it follows to add people to its no BS (no big shots) culture. Their template looks like this:

1. Happy people. Since one of SWA's core values and part of their vision is to have fun, they look first for a positive attitude and then trains for skills.
2. Helpful. They want people with other-centered, outgoing personalities who want to help others.
3. Humble. One of SWA's often heard adages is that arrogance is the quicksand of success. They want no big shots. If baggage is having a problem, everyone from every position gets out and helps, including the CEO!

4. Honest. The SWA cultural motto is always do the right thing.
5. Hungry: SWA not only hires people who are fun and like to have a good time, they also purposely hire ambitious, entrepreneurial self-starters.
6. Smart. They feel if they hire street smart, savvy people with all the above attributes they will learn what needs to be learned! (17)

So what do such mentoring cultures teach and encourage? As important as it is to believe in your own abilities is the belief that you can still improve. A mentoring paradox is that while it is good for a mentor and a protégé to have a high level of self-confidence, they also need a high drive for self-improvement. "I'm good now, but I can get better!" Excellent mentoring cultures instill in their participants the concept of a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. A surprisingly large number of people have what is called a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that their intelligence cannot be changed and their capabilities are mostly pre-set. Those with a growth mindset, in contrast, believe they can enhance their intelligence and capabilities through diligent practice and experience. Carol Dweck, a Stanford psychologist, has shown that how you view your mindset has a huge impact on performance. People with a fixed mindset miss opportunities for improvement, while those with a growth mindset see their capabilities as largely unlimited and move ever upward. They believe there will be a positive payoff for their hard work, so they work harder!(18) Cultures that emphasize the potential of people to learn, and provide rich opportunities to do so, will utilize mentoring realizing both the mentor and protégé will grow successfully from an effective relationship. In the light of all we are learning about neuroplasticity, from some of the most cutting edge research in neuroscience, about the ability of the human brain to be malleable and to grow and expand, we shouldn't be surprised.

A second quality a high performance mentoring culture will want to instill is having the protégé learn to see their position as a calling not just a job. As seen in the descriptions of high performing organizations above, they want their people to buy into their vision and values, to have a sense of passion and purpose. Researchers call this having a calling and not just a career or job. People with a job see their work as a way to a paycheck. People with a career work not just for a paycheck, but see it as a way to be successful and move forward in life. People with a calling see their work as fulfilling not because of extrinsic rewards because they believe it serves a higher good, draws on their strengths, engages them enthusiastically, and gives them great meaning and a sense of purpose. Studies have shown that people who convert their job descriptions into calling descriptions, and live them, have much better job satisfaction, retention, and results! (19)

A third essential quality that a high performance mentoring culture would seek to inculcate is an atmosphere of encouragement. While most managers would insist they adequately praise their people, a Gallup study that involved more than 1 million employee interviews across several industries found that praise or encouragement is painfully absent in most human interactions. Less than 33% of people could say that they had received at least one experience of recognition or praise in the last seven days! In one large health care organization cited by Gallup, just a 10% improvement in the amount of recognition given resulted in a gain of 11% in patient's evaluations of their hospital experience. Other evidence from various settings indicates positive changes in the amount of recognition consistently produce 10-20 percent improvements in productivity and revenue. (20)

Because of the power of praise, its ridiculous low cost of implementation and the rarity of its occurrence, offering encouragement to each other is one of the greatest opportunities for improvement in any environment. There is one caveat however. Praise must be given appropriately. Most people think they know how to encourage others, but fall short in practice. We encourage the use of the following simple recipe for providing effective encouragement.

1. Be sincere. If you can't be sincere say nothing at all!
2. Be specific. Detail exactly what was accomplished.
3. State the benefit. Exactly how what was done help or improve the situation?
4. Shape the praise. Some people like verbal praise, some a pat on the back, others a simple note. Study the person and tailor the praise to the person.
5. Make it as soon as possible. "Catch them while they are still sweating!"
6. Share the praise. Let other people know about good performance. (21)

In a research study that was named the best research in Human Resources for 1986 by the American Society of Training and Development, the author was able to establish that mentoring played a vital role in

career success. (22) It is interesting to note years later that the type of mentoring found as most significant was that of encouraging others as well as providing career guidance.

As we have previously discussed, such encouraging, constructive and respectful feedback can have a tremendously positive effect. A Brazilian psychologist, Marcial Losada, studied thousands of people in low and high performing teams for over a decade and came up with a mathematical model of 2.9013 to one as the tipping point. This was the ratio of positive to negative experiences or interactions that make a team successful. Positive experiences are defined as encouraging, constructive or instructive, and respectful. Negative experiences are discouraging, destructive, and full of contempt. It takes about three positive comments, expressions, or experiences to balance out the impact of only one negative experience. "Dip below this tipping point, now known as the Losada line, and workplace performance quickly suffers. Rise above it—ideally the research shows, to a ratio of 6 to 1—and teams produce their very best work." Determining this positivity ratio through his analysis of interactions enabled Losada to make startlingly accurate predictions about turnover, productivity and profitability in organizations of all types. In poor performing organizations he often found the ratio was 1 positive to 3 negative experiences or worse. (23) After he instructed team leaders in giving more positive feedback and encouraged more positive interactions, they made giant strides in productivity, improving their performance by as much as 40 percent. (24)

Think about this in the context of all the high performing cultures we discussed earlier. A mentoring culture that inculcates a growth mindset, a calling, and an environment of positive encouragement would not only build and sustain the level of success, but be a key component in propelling the organization to higher levels of greatness.

Organizations that want to grow in this climate of rapid change, chaos, and complexity are going to have to be learning organizations. As we have seen from the research studies examined above, it is not going to be high technology gizmos or marketing savvy as much as their ability to adapt and learn, to challenge and passionately engage their people that will be the keys to future prosperity. Creating the high performance mentoring culture will be an essential strategic component to achieving such success.

References

Berlew, D.E. and Hall, D.T. (1966). The socialization of managers: Effects of expectations on performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 11, 207-223.

Carol Dweck, Mindset: *The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006) P. 7.

Christina Douglas, Formal Mentoring Programs in Organizations: An Annotated Bibliography (Greensboro, North Carolina: *Center for Creative Leadership*, 1997) pp.91-93.

Eby, L., Allen T., and DuBois, D. (2008). Does mentoring matter? A multi-disciplinary meta-analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 72, issue 2, 254-267.

Freiberg and Freiberg, op.cit. pp. 60-73.

Hester J., and Setser, R. (2013) Mentoring: Adding value to organizational culture. *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, Vol. 6, issue 1, pp. 1-35.

Higgins, M. and Kram, K. (2001) Reconceptualizing mentoring at work: A developmental network perspective. Ac*ademy of Management Review,* Vol. 26, no. 2, 264-288.

Ibid. p.16.

Jerry Willbur, op. cit. p. 102.

Jerry Willbur, *Herding Hummingbirds: Creating and Keeping Uncommon Cross-Current Leaders (*Notre Dame: Corby Books, 2011) p.58.

Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Have Fallen: And Why Some Companies Never Give in* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009) pp. 159-160.

John Kotter and James Heskett*, Corporate Culture and Performance* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) p. 7.

Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994) p. 95.

Jim Collins, *Good to Great: why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) p. 39.

Jim Collins, Good to Great, p.13.

Jim Collins and Morten Hansen, *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck, Why Some Thrive Despite Them All* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010) p. 161

Kevin Freiberg and Jackie Freiberg, Nuts! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success (Austin, Texas: Bard Press, 1996) pp. 282-283.

Losada, M., and Heaphy, E. (2004) The role of positivity and connectivity in the performance of business teams: A nonlinear dynamics model. *American Behavioral Scientist,* 47(6), 740-765.

Losada, M. (2008) Work teams and the Losada line: New results. Positive Psychology News Daily. December 9, 2008 issue. Http://positivepsychology news.com/news/guest-author/200812091298.

Peter Drucker*, Management; Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974)

Rodd Wagner and James Harter, *12: The Elements of great Managing* (New York, Gallup Press, 2006) p. 52.

Tony Dungy and Nathan Whitaker, *The Mentor Leader* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2010) p. 19.

Wrzesniewski, A. et al (1997) Jobs, careers and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 21-33.

Willbur, J. (1987) Does mentoring breed success? *The American Society for Training and Development Journal,* Vol. 41, No. 11, 38-41.