



Business Basics

Put Me In Coach

Julie Watson, 12.22.05, 6:00 AM ET

As head of a small software vendor, Sandy Serkes hires a lot of kids straight out of college. Why not? They're eager and filled with energy and optimism. Along with that youthful exuberance comes inexperience, so Serkes spends a fair amount of time mentoring--whether it's grooming an employee for a more senior position or talking to him about budgeting his first real paychecks.

"As founder and CEO, mentoring is always part of the package," she says.

Serkes' situation isn't an unusual one. Everyone needs guidance and direction at some point, but with companies asking for more and more productivity out of the employees, it takes dedication and commitment to find the time to mentor.

"The workplace is so short-term focused and so driven by fear that no one has time to do things like mentoring," says Alan Gilburg, founder of the Gilburg Leadership Institute.

Who's to blame? Gilburg says it's that generation that you can't open up a newspaper or watch the news and not hear about: the baby boomers.

He says the boomers want to be the stars and don't see themselves as mentors.

"You have to get out of the game of being the star and become the coach. That takes a huge change of attitude," he says. "Star players don't make good coaches. You have to adopt the mindset that you want to make a star, and you really have to believe that that's a wonderful role to play."

So, if you're ready to walk the sidelines and develop some elite talent, here are a few tips on being a mentor.

-- Empathy. A good mentor must have the ability to remember what it was like to be inexperienced and unsure. If your mentee flubs a project, you need to give them perspective, show them that tomorrow's another day and that the customer and company will still be there, says Serkes.

-- Time. The mentor and protégé should meet at least once a week for a minimum of 30 minutes.

-- Resist The Urge To Take Over. Sure, it's easier if you call a client or compile their Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, but how will they learn if you do all the work?

-- A Question Is Better Than An Answer. Don't tell your protégé what to do or how you did it, but ask them questions that they have to struggle to answer, says Gilburg. Some questions to ask: How would you approach the situation; What are the factors you would pay most attention to; What are some other approaches; Why did you choose the solution you did over others?

“This increases their ability to think. When you give them answers, there's nothing there, no learning, no growth. Nothing is better or more lasting than discovering it yourself,” he says.

-- Role Play. If your protégé is in sales, pretend you're the customer and have them try their sales pitch on you; or if you're training reporters, pretend they're at a press conference with hundreds of other reporters trying to interview Apple Computer's (nasdaq: AAPL - news - people ) CEO Steve Jobs; or if they're being groomed to manage a Home Depot (nyse: HD - news - people ) store, give them a scenario where they have to talk to a problem worker. Give them honest feedback on how they conducted themselves.

-- Spell It Out. Both the mentor and mentee should voice their assumptions and expectations at the start of the relationship and what to do if those aren't met. An agreement from the beginning will keep the relationship from fumbling later.

-- Mentor The Whole Person. It's not just about the job. What your mentee does outside of work can have a huge impact on their work. Therefore, be prepared to look at work/life balance issues, whether it's getting them to question whether they can afford the payments on a flashy new sports car or going back to school.

-- That Mentor Glow. It's not only the mentee who will get something out of the relationship. The mentor will get satisfaction from seeing his protégé succeed, and if you're a business owner, it could even be smart business. Your protégé will move on eventually, and they may recommend their new firm hire you. Also, the good will they feel toward the company for making that investment in them will make them more productive.

More sales and happier employees? Who could resist that?