Structured versus Unstructured Mentoring Programmes

A structured mentoring programme is generally managed centrally. Somebody will have taken ownership of and responsibility for the programme. They will have set out what is expected from both the mentor and mentee, and will no doubt have a support package in place, ensuring that the mentor is equipped to fulfil their role. An unstructured mentoring programme develops over time, with little consideration, guidance or support from central management.

The key differences between structured and unstructured mentoring include:

**Shared Expectations**

For any mentoring programme to be successful the potential mentors and mentees need to know about it and understand the benefits of it! Unstructured programmes adopt a free-fall approach to mentoring, whilst structured programmes tend to ensure that the value and benefits of mentoring are well understood through internal communication programmes. This ensures that the mentors and mentees have a shared understanding of the mentoring programme and have similar expectations of how it will work. For instance, a structured programme ensures that both parties understand that the mentor’s role is to nurture, empower and support the development and growth of the mentee; whilst the mentee is the driver of the relationship. This provides a firm basis to the relationship between the mentor and mentee and encourages successful outcomes.

**Encouraging the Right Mentors and Mentees**

Seniority is not a reason for an individual to become a mentor. It is essential that the mentors have the right skills and experience. At the same time a mentee must be driven to develop and understand that they have to take personal responsibility for their own development. A structured programme will help the right potential mentors and mentees step forward for inclusion on the programme, through robust internal marketing, recruitment and selection of the right individuals.

**Matching the Right Mentors with the Right Mentees**

The right mentoring relationship will deliver exceptional results – the wrong mentoring relationship can damage the mentee and indeed the mentor. So the matching of the right individuals is essential. This matching is not only about both individuals’ knowledge, skills, experience and objectives, but also about rapport and chemistry. A structured programme will support this, encouraging the right individuals to work together.
Providing the Right Support

A structured programme provides support and supervision to the mentor and mentee and their relationship. It may provide training for the mentors so they understand their role is to nurture and not to advise the mentee. A structured programme also enables a support network between mentors and mentees, highlighting best practice which in turn encourages the mentor and mentee relationship to flourish.

Providing Structure

It’s all in the name – a structured programme provides structure! Structure ensures that there is a framework, guidelines and timelines for mentors and mentees to follow. This ensures that the mentoring sessions happen, that the mentee sets out their goals and how they will achieve those goals and also makes the mentee accountable to themselves and their mentor, therefore encouraging the achievement of those goals.

Assessing Progress

Structure makes it easier to assess the impact of the mentoring programme, and allows the consideration of what works and what doesn’t, so there can be a continual improvement of the mentoring programme itself. This is less easy with an unstructured mentoring programme.

In Summary

In setting out above the key differences between a structured and unstructured programme, it would appear that there are significant benefits to a structured programme. However, there are benefits to an unstructured programme – quite simply that there is no structure, there is no process, agenda or focus on timeline. This provides much greater flexibility and allows the mentoring relationship and outcomes to be much more organic. Of course a mentoring programme can take a hybrid approach, with elements of both the structured and unstructured approaches. Whether an organisation should have a more structured mentoring programme will in part be driven by the organisation’s culture. But it is worth noting that research suggests that over 70% of Fortune 500 companies have structured mentoring programmes in the workplace.