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## Six Steps to Implement a Mentor Program

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# SIX STEPS TO IMPLEMENT A MENTOR PROGRAM

The Chicago Compensation Association found success for its members with a mentor program.

**A** recent survey by the Chicago Compensation Association (CCA) found only 15 percent of its membership had three years or less experience in the profession and 15 percent had four to six years' experience. Furthermore, senior members complained that it was difficult to find applicants with the education and experience needed to fill entry-level compensation and benefits jobs. In an effort to strengthen its appeal to early career professionals and to provide a

meaningful development experience, CCA launched a mentor program in spring 2012 after more than a year of development.

The CCA Mentor Program was launched with 15 mentor-mentee pairs. According to CCA, the mentoring program offers considerable value to the mentor, mentee and the CCA for a relatively low investment. However, the development and implementation of the program required strong commitment from the board and the small taskforce

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# ANOTHER BENEFIT OF HAVING AN END DATE IS THAT IT FREES UP THE MENTOR TO WORK WITH ANOTHER DESERVING MENTEE.

that designed the program, as well as two of the board members who led the program. This article outlines a six-step process for developing and successfully implementing a mentor program.

## 1 Assess Membership Interest

An initial assessment of interest in a mentor program is important for at least three reasons.

- It will answer the question, “Is it worth it?” This process will help the board develop a basic understanding and some agreement on how the mentor program can contribute to the mission and goals of an organization and the cost that would be associated with the program.

- The information collected during an assessment can help design a program that meets the needs of the association. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

- Assessment includes reaching out to members to build commitment for the program. These programs are based on the assumption that members will invest effort and time in mentoring other members.

If the board decides to proceed, then employing focus groups or conducting a survey can be helpful to determine the membership’s interest in such a program and to obtain input on how the program should be structured.

## 2 Articulate Clear Program Goals and Value Proposition

If there is sufficient interest to proceed, it is important for the board to articulate program goals and a value proposition that is aligned with the association mission. First, setting goals requires the board to clarify its expectations for the program

and provides a context for making program design decisions. Second, the goals of the program and the value proposition for mentor and mentee provide basic information to market the program and develop orientation materials for participants. Finally, goals provide criteria to evaluate, to monitor and to create a foundation upon which to improve the program as experience is gained.

After goals have been formulated and there is a commitment by the board to proceed, a taskforce needs to be empowered to develop program guidelines and the materials to market the program and to provide an orientation for those who wish to participate.

## 3 Develop Program Guidelines, Marketing Content and Orientation Materials

The CCA design team included several board members, one of whom had recently developed a mentor program, and two members who had participated in such programs. One of the design team’s challenges was to engage association members, because the association recognized that it absolutely needed its active participation when the program went live. In developing the mentor program, CCA’s design taskforce had to consider a number of issues.

**Eligibility.** Determining who is eligible to participate is not as clear cut as one would expect. Questions to consider include: Are mentors required to have a certain amount of compensation experience? Can retirees serve as mentors? Is there a time commitment expectation? What constitutes “early career” for the mentee? Can anyone become a mentee?

**Nature of the relationship.** Some mentor programs primarily involve a distant or network kind of relationship, often computer based. Although CCA wanted its mentor program first and foremost to encourage interaction regardless of the venue in which it occurs, the association believed that face-to-face interaction was important because it strengthens the mentor-mentee relationship, enhances the value of the program and builds stronger member relationships with the CCA. The association’s experience shows that relationships with face-to-face interaction are more likely to endure than ones that are limited to emails and phone calls.

**Matching mentors and mentees.**

Establishing criteria for matching mentors and mentees can be tricky. The temptation is to make it like a dating game where mentees and mentors get to pick a person based on a host of criteria. This is problematic because more criteria quickly shrink the pool of possible matches, especially in smaller programs with fewer than 20 potential pairs. Furthermore, a mentor or mentee may learn more from a person who is not exactly like them.

**Confidentiality agreement.** The CCA program assessment uncovered some potential mentors who were concerned that confidential information might be shared inappropriately by mentees. Although having mentees sign a confidentiality agreement is one way to approach this issue, CCA decided to emphasize confidentiality in the orientation program as opposed to requiring a pledge. This approach seems to have worked well.

**Time period.** Specifying a time period may encourage pairs to better use their time and to avoid a situation where the relationship ends because one or the other no longer finds value or time to invest. Another benefit of having an end date is that it frees up the mentor to work with another deserving mentee. Even if there is an end date, it does not stop mentors and mentees from continuing their relationship on their own.

## 4 Recruiting Mentors and Mentees

Recruitment has two major challenges: getting equal numbers of mentors and mentees to participate, and recruiting individuals who are willing to invest the time and energy necessary to have a meaningful and rewarding relationship. CCA found it was the mentee who often did not follow through with the relationship.

Recruiting participants through normal communication channels is certainly necessary (i.e., announcements at meetings, postings on website, email blasts, etc.), but gaining the support of senior rewards professionals and association leaders is clearly one of the best methods to attract participants, especially those who will fill mentor roles.

## 5 Mentor and Mentee Program Orientation and Training

On the surface, becoming a mentor or mentee may seem relatively easy and straight forward. However, as with all human interaction, there is potential for misunderstandings and disappointments. A common misunderstanding is the expectation that the mentor will find a job for the mentee or help the mentee get promoted. This is not a realistic expectation and organizations likely do not want mentors to feel burdened with this responsibility or mentees who are disappointed in not achieving this outcome. As such, the outcomes for the mentees must be clearly specified; the mentor program is a development and networking opportunity.

Setting expectations for the program can be handled in several formats. Some programs provide information on a website or in documents sent to participants. However, CCA found a meeting during which mentors and mentees could learn about the program and the expectation associated with their roles was important. Attendance at this meeting confirms their commitment to the program. Having an orientation session allows participants to meet for the first time and actively

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engages mentors and mentees in the relationship. It provides an opportunity for networking and demonstrating to the mentor and mentee that they are part of something bigger than just their individual relationship.

Finally, the orientation program is an opportunity to clarify little issues so they don't become big issues. A senior compensation professional may think nothing of inviting a mentee to an expensive place for lunch. However, even if the mentee is only expected to pay for half, that can quickly become a barrier in the relationship.

## 6 Program Administration and Evaluation

There needs to be a designated leader to administer the program. Monitoring the relationships is important because some may falter based on miscommunications or varying commitments to the program. When a problem occurs, someone needs to step in and re-assign mentors and mentees or simply act as a sounding board or offer advice as to how to get the relationship back on track. Also, during the year, someone needs to remind some mentors and mentees to actively engage and encourage them to attend some shared events. A successful coordinator is able to make suggestions on points of discussion, recommend activities and plan events through the organization to foster the critical face-to-face meetings.

### Conclusion

Like any investment, the progress of a mentor program requires feedback to measure the results. The coordinator

should be proactive about keeping in contact with the participants and checking in on the partnerships. This approach keeps enthusiasm high, provides input and keeps the board informed. However, a formal evaluation process is vital to determine if the program is meeting the specific goals established by the board. A confidential annual survey of mentor program participants and their attendance at events can provide the information necessary to determine if the investment is worth it and provide insight on how the program can be improved. **lws**

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