

# A Mantra called MENTORING

As Indian corporate work environments get rapidly globalised, mentorship turns an indispensable tool in fostering a rewarding work-culture.



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## Backdrop

There is a buzz about India. The economy is booming and India is on a roll. Business opportunities abound. MNCs are flocking to India to check out the reports, for seeing is believing. For the first time ever, MNC global Boards have held their meetings in India, with the express purpose of observing first-hand what it is that has suddenly made India come alive. In the melee, they are racing each other to announce fresh investments, new plants and global R&D and outsourcing centres.

Industry Associations are tripping over each other to showcase leaders of top Fortune companies as guest speakers, to provide insights into their skills in managing diverse, complex and geographically spread conglomerates. The search for land, which poses its own set of challenges, and the absence of hotel rooms, which has spurred renewed opportunities for the hospitality sector, have been only a few of the natural consequences of this economic upturn.

Simultaneously, globalisation opportunities have got Indian companies looking beyond our shores. Not only have they demonstrated their entrepreneurial and technological prowess in the global arena as emerging MNCs, Captains of Indian industry have also adopted a positive mindset vis a vis China. No longer fearful of the fifteen year lead China has over us in the economic reforms process, industry has taken up the competitive challenge innovatively – sourcing from and exporting to China, and setting up manufacturing and exporting facilities there.

## The People Challenge

Whichever way you view it – inside India or India outside – the current period presents immense opportunities. However these reforms, globalisation, growth and boom, require people. For, it is people who are the key to managing complex strategies and organizations. Every executive I have spoken to in the past decade would tell me how tough business has become and how much margins were under pressure, because input costs have gone up, because raw material prices have shot through the roof, because ... because... because...

Yet, we see companies perform undeniably better every quarter. Market caps, shareholder returns and profitability have hit unprecedented highs. Today, that same refrain continues. In addition, there is now a distinct but plaintive cry of a shortage of people that the growing business demands, compounded by escalating attrition. The booming economy demands manning – and suddenly, despite our amazing, advantageous demographics, we are facing an acute shortage of talent.

The new refrain is 'talent hunt'. Every company expects to hire people who are ready to deliver. That, however, calls for the availability of the right skill sets, the appropriate talent fit and relevant training. As a consequence, the appetite for growth has compelled corporates to poach readily available skills, causing compensation packages to spiral. Executive challenges have morphed from pressures on margins, to fighting attrition, recruiting and retaining talent. And this is a huge challenge, for there are no quick fixes here.

## Work-life balance

Especially when one considers that executive after executive works longer hours whilst helplessly witnessing erosion in work-life balance, even as they gleefully participate in the corporate's escalating profits and their own mounting bonus earnings. Every one is stretched, and this tells on nerves and on family harmony. The acceleration of productivity in businesses brings along with it challenges in managing and enhancing relationships. Today, executives expect emotional intelligence from supervisors and colleagues, but find its supply scarce.

So we end up with an unsettling combination of a booming economy and an overall, warped work-life balance. A shortage of skilled talent. Attrition. A feeling of helplessness that the situation is taking control of us. A feeling of being left out, or passed-by. Jealousies. Stress at home and work. How do we balance life and attain happiness and fulfillment? How do we perform and become more effective? How do we avoid traversing the pill-popping path of the stressed?

In today's rapidly changing, globalised world, there is a perceptible need to hone communication and relationship skills, to improve adaptability to rapid change and to enhance respect for people of diverse backgrounds. A lot remains to be done to resolve employee-related dilemmas – for example, whilst objective appraisals and honest feedback are recognised as essential for employee development, executives are generally loathe to provide feedback to their juniors, being fearful of the emotion that the candour will generate. Clearly, companies need a systematic means of engaging with senior leaders as individuals.

## Enter the Mentor

Thinking of a mentor might conjure up visions of a wise druid in a white beard and flowing robes. How can this be of any relevance to a company on the threshold of an economic boom? Although the concept of mentoring started in the West only in the 1980s, the growing popularity is a response to compelling needs. Mentoring is now widely recognized in the West for its impact in leveraging personal and organisational

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development and as a highly effective way to quickly ramp up an employee's performance. It has just started emerging in India.

Imagine having a wise, experienced person alongside you to help you set important life goals and develop the skills to achieve them; someone whose prime motivation is your success; someone immune from but aware of company dynamics and politics; someone who takes time to listen and to guide you without any personal or political agenda; someone who is unbiased and non-threatening. There are few who would not benefit from such a relationship. This argument lends greater credence to external mentoring.

Mentoring is often referred to as the 'transfer of wisdom'. It is the process by which an individual learns from someone who has worn the same shoes and travelled the same path, someone metaphorically older and wiser. The mentor could work in the same organization, although there are many situations where external mentors are increasingly preferred. Mentoring is a customized, unique method of improving executive effectiveness through active listening and the use of questioning techniques that honour the person's individuality.

### How Mentoring works

The human dimension of Mentoring is what makes it work – and also what makes it well nigh impossible to measure. Basically, mentors provide individual leaders the objective feedback needed to nourish their growth and help them excel. The 360 degree appraisal feedback is often a useful data base and provides

phenomenal insights into an individual's interpersonal strength.

Surprisingly, even high-flyers rarely pause to reflect on the feedback, their own behaviour and how it impacts colleagues and the organisation at large. Mentors help make mentees aware of these characteristics and behaviour patterns, and then engage in a form of active learning that integrates organizational goals with wholesome personal development and joyful living. This helps leaders improve retention, enhance teamwork, align individuals to collective goals, facilitate succession and support organisational change.

Organisations implement mentoring at all levels of a company structure, from graduate recruits to top management. However, as with any programme or initiative, success is dependent ultimately on a high degree of senior level buy-in and commitment. Without such support, programmes risk death through lack of co-ordination and focus or even disruption by power groups or individuals seeking political gain.

For the senior executive, the mentor is an ideal sounding board and a powerful facilitator for personal growth along with behavioural and attitudinal change. He or she is an objective partner who will support and yet challenge views, behaviours and attitudes in a constructive manner. Above all, the executive gains an ally whose primary motivation is their success.

For it to succeed, mentoring must create a triangular relationship between the mentor, the mentee and the client (the mentee's employer), who all agree on a set of explicit goals that genuinely further their own interests as well as the common good of the organization.

During my engagements, I have come across budding leaders who have risked being passed-by because of their show of arrogance, absence of humility and poor interpersonal skills.

I have counselled a number of executives against clamouring for power and position. I remind them of how focusing on their duty (work) alone works for them. After all, I ask, is the management so short sighted as to overlook them to fill a higher position, when they possess all the right attributes? Why

would management risk hiring a rank outsider to fill the position in their stead? I conclude that they ought to make themselves "attractive" by continually working for a higher cause. After all, each one of us must take control of our own destiny.

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*(This article is inspired by readings from Harvard Business Review, The Mentoring Group and The Coaching & Mentoring Network)*

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