

“The Importance of Mentoring Relationships”

Ashley Dugger, DBA, SHRM-CP

Program Chair – HR Management

Western Governors University

You’ve probably heard before that everyone should have a work best friend – someone to vent to, someone to laugh with, someone to look forward to spending time with at work each day. While developing strong work friendships and working relationships is a critical piece of our work success and enjoyment, another relationship that deserves our attention is that of a mentor. Human resources professionals operate in quite a bit of grey area, which in and of itself can be stressful and daunting but can also be made extra challenging by the emotionally charged situations we face in areas like performance management, reductions in force, and terminations. A built-in support system and advocate through a mentoring relationship can be a tremendous asset during the difficult times and someone to celebrate with during the positive ones!

My first experience with a mentor relationship was equal parts formal and informal. I transitioned to HR from years of operational leadership and non-profit management. While I had plenty of experience with HR related tasks and functions, my foray into “official” HR was a bit of an eye opener to the complexities HR professionals face on a daily basis. Thankfully, I had a fantastic director of HR that I bonded with very quickly and took me under her wing to mentor me. We started off with more of the formal mentoring pieces and would spend some time every day going through non-work related cases or tasks, sometimes we would role play scenarios, she encouraged my professional development, took me to shadow her during meetings and built my confidence with making independent decisions. She also supported me in applying for a formal HR mentoring and leadership program for which I was accepted and expanded my mentoring network considerably through that program.

Over time, our mentoring relationship became more informal as we both transitioned to other roles outside of the organization. We continued to stay in touch and work on presentations together at various HR conferences and association seminars, support each other in our new roles, and generally be a support for one another during difficult times – both professionally and personally. I knew I could still call on her for advice at any time, but the mentoring relationship had also evolved to a strong point of mutual advocacy and support. As I thought about my own professional growth in the HR space, I realized how critical it was that I had someone willing to take dedicated time out of their own very packed schedule to support me. Whether it was a lunch over which we shared ideas and hashed out best practices or shadowing a meeting of the board of directors, all of our interactions were valuable. To see someone having faith in your abilities when you might have doubts is one of the best gifts of the mentoring relationship.

While our mentoring relationship evolved through a natural desire to support each other in a very small HR team and challenging work environment, I often encourage other HR professionals (regardless of their experience level) to proactively seek out a mentoring relationship. Whether formal

or informal, think about the characteristics of an HR leader you admire. Consider what you could learn from someone from a different background, someone with a varying professional skillset than your own, someone who is dedicated to helping you succeed and wants nothing in return except to see you progress. Reach out to those you would be interested in pursuing a mentoring relationship with and ask to simply have a conversation about what you are hoping to gain from the partnership. Be clear about your goals with developing a mentoring relationship, discuss your career objectives and experience, and also be willing to reciprocate in the mentoring space.

I've learned that most people are willing to help – all you have to do is ask! Advice and perspective from others are a crucial piece of our own growth. While it may not be natural for you to seek out this kind of relationship on your own, step out of the comfort zone and see what you can learn. We so often serve as the advocates for others in the HR industry, but we also have to remember we benefit from the support of an advocate as well. Find someone you can trust, you can be vulnerable with, and someone who is willing to dedicate time and energy to the partnership. Plan regular check ins – phone calls, chats, lunches or coffee breaks – figure out what works for both of your schedules and stick to those dedicated times. Don't be afraid to find more than one mentor or seek out a new mentoring relationship if you outgrow an existing one or feel it is not the right fit anymore. Ultimately, your mentor should be able to teach you, to challenge you, to support you, and to encourage you. When you feel ready, perhaps you can also serve as a mentor to an HR professional in need!