

The Economist

Might Visibility Be the New Mentoring by Julie Winkle Giulioni

Research consistently finds that employees across the generational spectrum believe that one of a manager's fundamental roles is to support the development of his or her employees. And yet, in most organizations, the level of satisfaction with that development remains relatively low.

Leaders – aware of this expectation and, in most cases, wanting to deliver on it – make a valiant effort. They send people to training and try to commit themselves to mentoring. Yet, many simply don't have the know-how; and even more don't have the time. Given the pace and complexity of today's workplace, leaders are being tasked with more than ever before. Unfortunately, this means that their ability to proactively and robustly provide meaningful mentoring is suffering (along with the engagement, growth and performance of their employees).

But being busy should be no reason to abandon mentoring others. Instead, it might actually present an opportunity – an opportunity to expand a leader's capacity to help others grow while acknowledging the fundamental truth that employees own their own careers and development. And that opportunity involves leveraging 'visibility' as a kind of do-it-yourself mentorship.

Visibility is defined as "the state of being able to see or be seen" and "the degree to which something has attracted general attention." Traditionally in organizations, this means offering employees the opportunity to attend events, showcase talents, represent the team, meet key leaders, or otherwise see or be seen. This sort of visibility provides the recognition that people crave, but generally falls short in terms of growth because it's neither set up nor mined for learning.

Leaders can't simply shove employees out into the spotlight and hope for the best. For visibility to serve as a legitimate tool for development, it requires intentionality. Here are four high-impact actions leaders can take to set others up for 'do-it-yourself mentoring' success and, in the process, empower employees to leverage visibility for learning.

Understand the individual's goals and desires. Any sort of development begins with an understanding of strengths, skills, interests, opportunities for improvement, values and eye toward the future. This become context for development in general and offers a focus for a visibility opportunity.

Identify an opportunity. Consider what you know about the person and select some visibility opportunities that might further his or her individual goals. It could be as simple as joining you at meeting.

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Or presenting to senior management. Or training a workshop. Or speaking at a conference. The key is that the opportunity offers the chance for focused growth in an area of interest to the employee.

Facilitate intention-setting. Help employees establish a focus, intention or goal for the visibility opportunity. Otherwise, it's just activity rather than a developmental activity. Be available to brainstorm how he or she can make the most of this opportunity but resist the natural temptation to help manage the process. Action plans, next steps and the like rest squarely with employees as they embrace DIY development.

Explore what was gained. At an appropriate time (ideally initiated by the employee – but you may need to take the lead here) revisit the visibility opportunity. Facilitate a brief conversation during which you ask questions to help the person reflect on the experience, insights gained, actions taken and how they might leverage all of this toward next developmental steps. Acknowledge effort, progress and successes. Building confidence in the ability to develop through visibility may prompt employees to take more initiative to do the same in the future, removing even more of the burden from the shoulders of managers.

Leaders will always have a responsibility for developing others. Yet, given escalating workloads, tightening time constraints and virtual nature of business, managers must find creative and time-effective ways to support others in their development. Visibility – intelligently conceived and implemented – can be a powerful DIY form of mentorship – and a way to grow people, grow capacity, and grow the business.

*Julie Winkle Giulioni is a champion for workplace growth and development and helps leaders optimize talent and potential within their organizations. Named one of Inc. Magazine's top 100 leadership speakers, she's the co-author of the international bestseller, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go* and author of the *Nautilus* and *Axiom* business book award-winner, *Promotions Are So Yesterday*. Julie is a regular contributor to numerous business publications.*