

PATHS FOR

THE FUTURE

by David Whitemyer

The concept of mentorship is rooted in the very culture and craft of design. Through apprenticeships and internships, university co-op requirements and association development programs, seasoned professionals have long nurtured younger practitioners. Indeed, when recent graduates enter the workforce, their education has only just begun; mentoring can provide the framework for neophytes to develop the technical and practical skills necessary for a fruitful career.

But across the industry, mentorship can—and does—happen in myriad ways. Some firms run formal programs; others prefer a more casual style. For every company rejuvenating an existing mentoring practice—or customizing it to the quirks of the Millennial work force—another drops theirs in favor of sparking such relationships more organically. In many cases, mentorship happens not as the result of a systematized effort but as a byproduct of how the firm itself is structured. Regardless of how mentorship is nurtured and encouraged, it's recognized as an invaluable tool to recruit employees and hold onto them for the long haul, increasing the return on investment in a staffer's professional development.

Targeted—but not exclusive—to the young

Credit the youth factor for an industry-wide resurgence in mentorship programs. By 2014, Millennials will account for 36 percent of the world's workforce; by 2020, that percentage will rise close to 50. In the U.S., recent post-college professionals outnumber Gen-Xers by 150 percent, with Baby Boomers hardly even registering on the scale. Cannon Design is among the firms who recognize that its survival depends on growing the next generation of leaders, on having them embrace its mission and develop both design and business acumen. And so Cannon—a multidisciplinary practice with roughly 1,000 employees spread over 15 offices—takes a serious, structured approach to mentoring. “We introduce mentoring to all of our new hires, even mentioning it during recruitment,” says Barbara Kendziora, associate vice president of training and development. “We have a very formal system, but we know that a lot of informal mentoring occurs in our offices as well.”

Kendziora explains that new interior designers are paired with a “buddy” to get them acclimated to the advisor-disciple concept. “We also have a form—a checklist, really—that both mentors and protégés must complete,” she says. “We enter the information into a database, and it's where we look first when matching up employees.” Cannon's system is skills-based, meaning that employees can request mentoring in certain areas such as technology or sustainable design.

In addition to providing general day-to-day guidance and training, mentors are also encouraged to periodically assign “stretch assignments” to mentees. “They'll be asked to do something outside of their normal tasks, such as present to a client,” says Kendziora. “It's meant to push employees outside their comfort level, encouraging them to take risks.”

Symmes Maini & McKee Associates, a three-office, 175-person architecture and design firm, has an equally formalized mentoring program, with employees likewise paired in a concerted manner. After giving each protégé an opportunity to list his or her top three choices of mentors, a framework committee decides on the final mentor-mentee match. “The relationships last one year,” explains human resources director Jane Quercia. “We ask the pairings to meet at least once a month, but suggest every two to three weeks.” Topics discussed include career goals, work skills, and issues within the firm. SMMA even provides pairs with a \$350 annual budget for meals, museum visits, and other out-of-office “field trips” where they can chat and connect.

Quercia acknowledges that they can't be too hard-lined about who is paired up, or what the mentoring is focusing on. “If things aren't working out, then we need to talk about another approach,” she says. The firm even allows “no-fault divorce”: Duos can split up with zero repercussions if the connection isn't thriving.

When SMMA's mentoring program launched in fall 2002, there were restrictions on who could participate. But it has since expanded and evolved. “It was originally open to junior associates only,” Quercia explains. “Now it's open to everyone—even people in accounts payable can participate.” Other practices are cottoning to the benefits of casting a wider net, not limiting mentorship to just young professionals but thinking about it as an ongoing effort for staffers of all levels.

Deconstructed vs structured

A similar formal-yet-flexible approach is manifested in the Interior Design Experience Program, developed by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification. One might think that the supervisor-mentor-mentee protocol would be filled with stringent rules and checklists, but the program is actually quite customizable to different designers and firms, explains NCIDQ executive director Jeff Kenney. "IDEP is kind of like curriculum for on-the-job training," he says. "And we want it to be more of a tool for the employer and participant."

The IDEP guidebook has a comprehensive framework of tasks and responsibilities for both parties. Mentees are supposed to track hours spent within different design phases and schedule meetings with their mentor at least three times per year. The mentor, in turn, must provide advice about work-related challenges and encourage the protégé to set specific goals. But the guidebook is just a starting point, suggests Kenney. "We've found that a lot of people start IDEP, but many never finish it." Those using the program often adapt it to fit their needs, abilities, and office culture. "We think it's a great resource for the profession. Young designers should have mentors."

Gary Lee Partners used to have a very structured mentorship program. But it seemed to inhibit informal conversations and teaching moments, notes principal David Grout. "The most important part of mentoring is the relationship, and good relationships form organically—not through formal pairings."

The Chicago-based firm, with a staff around 40, still runs a mentorship program, but employees aren't as active about documenting everything as they used to be. Mentors are often aligned with mentees with whom they work closely, but that doesn't prohibit a mentor from coaching other staffers as well. "The best opportunity I have to mentor an employee is in a cab to or from a meeting," says Grout. He goes on to differentiate between training—a scheduled focus on specific skill development—and mentoring, which he sees as an opportunity to provide myriad professional and life lessons "in the moment."

Leaders of other firms expressed a similar sentiment, choosing to structure their practice according to small departments that nurture relationships between staffers of all levels. "Mentoring is somewhat informal here," says Joan MacKeith, senior associate at Rockwell Group's New York office. "We find that it mostly happens within our studio system, structured according to smaller, consistent teams that make it easier to have a one-on-one mentorship experience."

Designing a looser definition of mentor

Grout identifies his own mentor not as a great designer or firm leader but as a client of 22 years who's been demanding and fair, and with whom Grout has developed a long-lasting professional and personal relationship. Indeed, a mentor doesn't have to be another interior designer, or even an office mate, but simply one who's capable of encouraging and pushing a younger professional towards growth, maturity, and leadership.

Mirroring that sentiment is Stephen Beacham, IIDA, a principal at Daroff Design in Philadelphia. He says mentoring is an attitude, and that it's just about how one approaches working with others, particularly younger staff member. "Mentoring should be second nature for those in our profession," he suggests. "It's part of giving back, and part of bringing up the next generation of designers and firm leaders." Beacham isn't against formalized programs. In fact, he's served as a mentor for a few people going through the NCIDQ process and the National Council of Architectural Registration Board's Intern Development Program.

Daroff Design also has an annual professional development review for employees in which Beacham often provides career guidance. Yet he looks at mentoring as an opportunity—a responsibility, even—to provide emerging designers with challenges, to let them know when they've succeeded, and to redirect them when there's room for improvement. "No one has a title at the end of their name that says 'mentor,'" he jokes. Good mentoring is unspoken and not accomplished by following specific criteria or a checklist. Mentoring is done by watching someone work, gleaning their work habits and life interests, sharing various philosophies, and developing a friend and advisor relationship. "A mentor is really just a professional role model." A role that shouldn't be taken lightly—or for granted.

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IMPLEMENTING A MENTORING PROGRAM

“When your designers know that you’re investing in them, they’ll invest in you,” suggests Stephen Beacham, IIDA, a principal at Daroff Design. With a mentoring program, young employees will not only become more skilled and well-rounded, they will be more satisfied—and stick around. A few things to keep in mind when implementing a mentoring program, whether formal or more casual.

CREATE A FORMAT

Decide if your firm will use a “pre-made” mentoring system by an organization such as NCIDQ or NCARB, or develop your own protocol. Either way, the structure should include regular meetings and clear goals.

DETERMINE PAIRINGS

Some firms have protégés list skills they’d like to be mentored in, which helps match that employee with an appropriate mentor; others allow pairings to form organically.

MAKE IT VOLUNTARY

Not all principals and managers make great mentors, and some young employees are content with their station in the firm. Don’t force senior or junior staff into a partnership if they’re not invested.

TRAIN EVERYONE

Help all employees understand the expectations and responsibilities of the program—not just mentors and protégés, but human resources and senior leaders as well.

BE ADAPTABLE

Sometimes pairs don’t gel. Sometimes employees get busy and can’t get together for their mentoring meeting. And sometimes expectations aren’t met. Everyone in the process has to be flexible.