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Commentary by



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Carla Kimbrough-Robinson has spent nearly 20 years in newsrooms and is a trained life coach with Inspire Higher International, LLC, a Denver-based personal development company. Send her questions at coaching@inspirehigher.net.

For more information about creating a formal mentoring program in your company, here's the contact information: Rita S. Boags, Ph.D., Leadership Technologies, P.O. Box 2497, Castro Valley, CA 94546. Phone: (510) 581-2946. Web site: www.leadershiptechnologies.com

Formal mentoring program great for developing staff

Learning. Growing. Fewer Mistakes. Career Development at warp speed. That's what mentoring can do for your career. This may not be the mentoring you're familiar with, where the mentor adopts a mentee gradually over time. No, this mentoring is more formal in nature, linking virtual strangers with a mutual agreement to learn and grow. Mentoring is a tool for developing and retaining employees while sharing expertise and developing employees' skills.

Rita Boags, an organizational consultant and educator, has been spreading the word about the benefits of mentoring for 20 years. Her program, offered through her Castro Valley, Calif.-based company, Leadership Technologies, promotes having structure that improves learning and quickens growing. Boags developed her formal program from years of study and work in community, academic and corporate settings.

You'll recognize many of the corporations and agencies for which she has designed programs: Fannie Mae, Hughes Aircraft Co., The World Bank, John Hancock Financial Services, Dow Corning Corp., Coca Cola Company, Ernst & Young, General Motors Corporation Finance Group, U.S. Department of Labor, State Farm Insurance. That client list gives her even more credibility.

The skeptical among you may charge that she hasn't worked with journalists, so what can you learn from her? Journalists, after all, are a different breed. Put your skepticism away: She's worked with journalists, too.

I met her recently during a program she led at Harvard University. She was the presenter at the Maynard Media Academy, which provides management and leadership training to journalists.

When I was invited to be a mentor, I gladly agreed. The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education and I go back more than 15 years. Through its Management Training Center, now called Maynard Management at Kellogg, I received invaluable professional development

and exposure to, among other things, accounting, advertising, circulation, production and newsroom management both in the classroom at Northwestern University and during an on-site stay at the *Seattle Times*.

MIJE, renamed for its co-founder Robert Maynard after his death in 1993, has developed hundreds of jour-

nalists of color: reporters, copy editors, assignment editors, top editors and even publishers. By assembling a group of seasoned journalists, top-notch educators and experts, MIJE prepares journalists of all races to meet the challenges ahead.

Boags was one of those experts. She was a returning presenter for MIJE, so that told me she had something to offer, even for journalists. The structure that Boags championed reminded me of the relationships I've had as a trained coach working with clients on the move.

In Boags' program, formal mentoring matches people from different areas of an organization — or in this case different organizations — so they can learn from each other. The partnership is guided by a written agreement that details when and how the pair will meet (by phone, e-mail or video conferencing), what they will discuss and share, and any ground rules necessary for success. So, this type of mentoring goes beyond the informal pairings, usually developed over time among people with similar backgrounds.

With that paradigm shift on mentoring, that opens the world for pairings. For example, a newsroom person could adopt a marketing person or vice-versa to speed growth and learning. An editor

from a smaller paper can pair with an editor at a larger paper who wants to explore community connections.

Boags didn't spend a lot of time discussing cross-cultural mentoring, but she has done a significant amount of work in that arena. I surmise the impact that a formal mentoring program could have on the number of journalists of color reaching senior newsroom ranks could be phenomenal.

The informal mentoring we're familiar with will never go away, but formal mentoring is something this industry needs and should explore. —

MENTORING TIPS

- Think about partnerships that succeeded and those that failed. Respect, trust and clear communication are key ingredients that contribute to the success of all relationships, including mentoring pairs. Take the best of what you learned about any relationship and apply it to your mentoring partnership.

- Commit to structure and process. What commitments will the pair make? How often will they talk? What expectations do the mentor and mentee have? Boags recommends committing two hours a month for a year to the partnership. That two hours can be carved out in a number of ways: meetings, lunch or scheduled telephone calls.

- Create a plan for learning. What do the mentee and mentor want to learn? What career development goals does the mentee have? How can that learning be best achieved?

- Have the right frame of mind. If you're a mentee, be someone who's willing to learn and grow and have some career goals. If you're a mentor, be willing to share and do so at a regular, consistent time.