



**Excerpt from “Common-Sense Workplace
Mentoring: A do-it-yourself system for strengthening
your business...one person at a time” By Susan
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Chapter 2. The Common-Sense Workplace Mentoring System.

How do organizations get to be “mentoring gems”? Their owners and managers solve common business challenges by building common-sense mentoring systems. Some of those I interviewed did not know they had a mentoring system until I named it for them. It just seemed like a sensible approach to solve those business needs. An owner ceases to have enough time in a week to be the primary resource for employees. A management team realizes that newly hired people cannot possibly absorb all of the knowledge they need in a training class. An employee or manager has high career aspirations.

I have created the Common-Sense Workplace Mentoring System to draw together the mentoring commonalities of the gems I’ve interviewed, as well as my own experiences. Some of the mentoring systems are very formal and complex, others less so, depending on the nature and size of the business. They all use workplace mentoring as a critical element in their organizational success.

By definition there is no cookie-cutter approach to mentoring. Each of the businesses I've studied has evolved its mentoring process according to the organization's and learners' needs. The mentoring content of each is significantly different from the others. I have discovered, though, that all of these businesses share fundamental components of mentoring. I call those The Six Building Blocks of Successful Common-Sense Workplace Mentoring.

The Six Building Blocks of Successful Common Sense Workplace Mentoring

1. Evaluate people's strengths, needs and aspirations individually.

We learn uniquely. No two people bring exactly the same qualities to a job. The development process is much more effective and efficient when it can be shaped to the person. What are the requirements for success? Where is this person strong? Where can this person use development?

2. Create opportunities to learn on the job.

We learn by doing. Use the workplace as the classroom. Learning is retained at a higher level when just-in-time and directly applied to the work. What are activities that will give this person a chance to use strengths? What are activities that will give this person a chance to improve?

3. Define teaching and learning roles.

We learn with clear expectations. Set specific goals and responsibilities for the mentoring process, including content and pace. Review and revise continually to reflect progress.

How will you and your mentee move the process ahead?

4. Give direct feedback.

We learn with encouragement. Mentoring is a two-way process. The parties need to exchange feedback, with emphasis on what is working well, openly and continually to stay on track with each other and the learning goals. How can you deliver feedback that your mentee hears? How can you get feedback for yourself?

5. Measure progress.

We learn when we build on success. Create incremental measurements, both formal and informal, to give the mentee and mentor frequent, meaningful marks of success. Where are you and your mentee going and how will you know when you've gotten there?

6. Reward the team effort.

We learn when we feel energized. Install a culture of mentoring by recognizing mentee and mentor efforts and successes. Make it rewarding and fun to teach and learn. What is in it for people to be mentors and mentees? Why would they want to do this?

A simple mentoring system story

I am a woodcarver. Sam, who admired my work, asked me to teach him. I'd learned to carve by watching and working alongside my father, so that seemed like a sensible way to proceed.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I constructed a simple mentoring system using all six Building Blocks.

1. Evaluate strengths, needs and aspirations. Sam had never done any kind of woodwork, so he needed to learn everything about how to use the tools and navigate the grain. He did have a good sense of design and was able to sketch his idea to achieve a particular effect with the grain.

2. Create opportunities to learn on the job. The workplace was my "studio", my kitchen table, equipped with wood and an array of gouges and chisels. We would each work on a carving, as I had done with my father.

3. Define teaching and learning roles. My role was to provide tools, show Sam how to plan and make his cuts artistically and safely, and give him pointers as he worked. His role was to literally dig in, and to use the tools safely. The goal was for him to complete his first carving. Initially he worked only at my table, so I could advise him on the best way to cut the wood and not himself. We worked together once a week. When he gained skill and confidence, he would take his emerging sculpture and some of my tools with him to work on his own between our sessions.

4. Give direct feedback. Sam and I agreed that I would give artistic feedback in addition to skill-building guidance. He had to alter his design several times to accommodate the wood's characteristics. I wanted to be sure he would feel receptive to my suggestions for changes. He agreed to ask questions to help me know what he wanted to learn. I had not taught anyone to carve before, so this was valuable to me.

5. Measure progress. I broke the process into clear steps: planning the design, cutting accurately and safely, roughing out the design on the wood, carving the details, and putting a finish on the piece. We planned at the beginning of each step and I congratulated at the end of each. The final measurement was that he made a carving he was proud of.

6. Reward the team effort. This mentoring was inherently fun and rewarding because we were friends, and he created a very nice piece of art. To make Sam's "graduation" special, though, I gave him a small set of tools for his own. This was 35 years ago, and I hope he's still using them.

On the Job Activity

Create an Individual Mentoring Plan.

Select someone in your organization who could benefit from being mentored by you, and work through the Six Building Blocks to create a beginning but comprehensive mentoring plan.

The Six Building Blocks of Workplace Mentoring

1. Evaluate people's strengths, needs and aspirations individually.

We learn uniquely. No two people bring exactly the same qualities to a job. The development process is much more effective and efficient when it can be shaped to the person.

Who is the mentee?

What is one strength to be developed, one area for improvement or one career aspiration?

2. Create opportunities to learn on the job.

We learn by doing. Use the workplace as the classroom. Learning is retained at a higher level when just-in-time and directly applied to the work.

Identify one way the workplace could be used as a classroom for this example.

3. Define teaching and learning roles.

We learn with clear expectations. Set specific goals and responsibilities for the mentoring process, including content and pace. Review and revise continually to reflect progress.

What skills, knowledge, and experience do you have to offer your mentee?

What will be the goal of this mentoring relationship? What specifically will success look like?

How will you and the mentee work together? One- to-ones? Shadowing? Partnering? Scheduled or as-needed?

4. Give direct feedback.

We learn with encouragement. Mentoring is a two-way process. The partners need to exchange feedback, with emphasis on what is working well, openly and continually to stay on track with each other and the learning goals.

Consider whether or not the mentor will formally contribute to the mentee's performance review.

5. Measure progress.

We learn when we build on success. Create incremental measurements, both formal and informal, to give the mentee and mentor frequent, meaningful marks of success.

What might an initial, short-term measurement be?

6. Reward the team effort.

We learn when we feel energized. Install a culture of mentoring by recognizing mentee and mentor efforts and successes. Make it rewarding and fun to teach and learn.

Praise? Fun? Time to mentor? Mentee becomes a mentor? Pay? Career Path?

On the Job Activity

Have a conversation with your mentee to review the outline you have just created.

Ask your mentee for input and come to agreement on these initial steps.

A Tailoring-the-Mentoring-System Story

Community Coffee Shop

Kate and Jeff Jones have tailored their mentoring system to their evolving business. They launched their dream over 10 years ago – to open a coffee shop that would offer the highest quality products in the most socially responsible fashion. Now they have several retail stores and a roastery. Community Coffee Shop frequently wins recognition ranging from major industry awards to local honors.

Jeff says, “Core values are key to how we run our business. Social, environmental and fiscal responsibilities are not just for marketing: they are who we are as people. When Community Coffee Shop was small, Kate and I were the business, and it was easy to project our values to our customers and the community. Now that we’ve grown, others are the face of the business. Skills can be trained; values need to be cultivated. Mentoring is how we help employees and community partners understand and integrate these values into their work. We want to build relationships within Community Coffee Shop, the local and global communities.”

The retail stores and the roastery are different businesses, linked of course by coffee and Community Coffee Shop’s values. Mentoring thus looks a little different in each setting.

Retail Store:

Rich coffee air welcomes me as soon as I open the door, and artwork adorns the walls. People fill the small tables and a long line. It looks like I'm going to have a bit of time to study the colorful paintings near me, but I arrive at the counter surprisingly quickly. The three staff members are working like the proverbial well-oiled machine. They exchange tasks continuously—taking orders, making drinks, serving, taking payments. All the while they are smiling, chatting with each customer pleasantly and professionally. They work swiftly, yet without rushing customers. I settle down with my beautiful cappuccino and pastry. I notice that whenever the waiting line dwindles, whoever is not needed to serve customers turns to other tasks. The moment customers start to line up again, all staff are back at the counter. Many customers greet each other, join each other's tables. This is a neighborhood gathering place, a community comfort. Coffee and community are truly what Community Coffee Shop is about. The owners develop each staff member to do the excellent work I observe every time I visit. They also develop each to find individual ways to contribute to the community.

Kate and Jeff used to evaluate developmental needs and wants at the point of hire, a traditional approach. They found, though, that new employees often do not understand what the organization can offer them until they have been there for a little while. Kate now gives the employees time to get comfortable with the culture first, and the evaluation takes place a couple of months after hire. The hiring process involves a very detailed application, with store managers doing the interviewing. Applicants have a chance to job shadow during the hiring process. Kate orients new employees herself, introducing them to the culture of Community Coffee Shop as well as other expectations. Sometimes this culture-centered orientation helps people decide this

is not what they want to do. Kate is committed to people doing work they love, and it is a success if an employee realizes that something else would be a better fit.

When the employee has learned the basics, further development is offered. There is a check-in on the basic learning at the six-month point. Kate and store managers meet with each employee one-to-one to review the employee's self-evaluation as well as the manager's evaluation. Each employee has the opportunity to develop beyond doing a great job – doing a great job is the minimum requirement. Development plans are very flexible, completely individualized in content and pace. For instance, an employee just promoted to shift leader wants to learn more about community involvement, a core value of Community Coffee Shop. She has been given the responsibility of communicating about community involvement internally in the organization. She gains development in an area of interest as well as gaining an additional leadership role. The business benefits by having all employees better informed about Community Coffee Shop's socially responsible culture. Another employee wants to learn more about products. That person is taking on the update of the product notebook as a developmental project, researching all products, origins and stories. Kate mentors both of these employees in these areas, even though they report to a manager, because she is the resident expert.

Most skill learning in the stores is hands-on, supported by videos giving specialized information about products and processes. Kate and managers talk with and observe employees, looking for something that engages the person in the company, that benefits the individual and the company. Mentoring is structured to help employees develop towards their own dreams. They try to not make people do things they do not want to do: for example, cashing out at the end of the day.

Most mentoring at Community Coffee Shop focuses on values and culture: how they treat each other, customers and the community. Mentoring the staff around community involvement is a challenge. It can take employees a while to believe that community is really part of the work at the coffee shop, and the high degree to which Kate encourages them to get involved in whatever interests them in the community.

Teaching and learning are two-way at the coffee shop. Kate says she learns as much from mentoring someone as that person learns from her. Mentoring may come from Kate, from managers, shift leaders and fellow team members. On a daily basis, team members mentor each other constantly. Mentees are placed with mentors who have the appropriate expertise. Kate will work with the employee who is developing the product notebook. Employees may even be matched with customers and community members for learning. Community Coffee Shop mentors people outside the organization, as well. They have hosted a European entrepreneur who spent a week immersed in Community Coffee Shop's work and culture. His goal was to learn enough to open coffee shops in his country over the following three years. The coffee shop mentors its wholesale customers, growers, and teaches the local community about social issues. Kate and Jeff even mentored an employee to learn all aspects of running the store, to meet that person's desire to open a competitor coffee shop. Kate says, "There is room for all of us in the community. It is a joy to help others open successful and value-based businesses."

Feedback is often unstructured, on a real-time basis, and is two-way. Feedback comes from all directions. Employees keep a notebook of compliments as well as concerns and suggestions for

daily review. Team members give feedback to each other on the job. Kate writes a lot of positive feedback notes to employees.

Kate continually works on how to measure learning. The culture is so important for employees to learn, as it drives all performance expectations, yet it is difficult to quantify. Kate gives the example of learning what music is appropriate to play in the retail stores. It is important to set a mood with music that enhances the store environment. Employees have to match the musical tastes of the customers, monitor volumes, etc. This is quite intangible, yet must be done with good judgment.

Rewards for teaching and learning are various, numerous and frequent. There is a sense of pride and personal satisfaction. There is a career path for mentors, movement into lead and manager positions. Performance-based pay is derived from team and individual assessments. Team-based customer service greatly impacts tips, as well. Higher performers earn more shifts. There are many on-the-spot rewards, such as movie tickets.

The Roastery:

Jeff creates a manufacturing environment that is inspirational. On the surface, that seems like a contradiction. Production work has to be done. How to retain employees' interest in lifelong learning is the challenge. Someone may easily understand a manufacturing job, but here there is more because of Community Coffee Shop's products and values.

I arrive early to see Jeff at the roastery, a good excuse to relax with a cup of coffee in the small café. The server at the counter welcomes me, helps me decide what coffee I want, lets Jeff know I am there, and offers me a newspaper to read while I'm waiting. Clearly customer service is as excellent here as it is in the retail store. I settle down at a table and look around. The roastery has just moved to a wonderful new facility, with state-of-the-art equipment. Right in front of me is an open space where I can watch the roasting happen. I don't need the newspaper. There is built-in entertainment, and it is fascinating.

Jeff explains that he wants to establish a strong tie between producing coffee and selling it. The public can see how coffee is roasted. The public can also see how coffee is grown and harvested. Photographs show Jeff and Kate's socially responsible partners – nearly 20 coffee plantations around the world. When the public understands the big picture, they gain appreciation for the product. When employees understand the big picture, they learn the importance of Community Coffee Shop's values and goals.

The roastery has five employees, with varied lengths and types of experience. Teamwork is necessary to efficiently cover all of the functions that go into the finished product. Mentoring is part of the teamwork that develops employees' ability to cover all of the functions.

Jeff was the only Master Roaster when that part of the business was growing by leaps and bounds. Jeff believes in life balance, and the scales were tipped much too far towards work. Around the same time, Guy came to work in the retail store. He had experience with coffee

shops elsewhere, and had sought out Community Coffee Shop. He was looking for a career, and presented his goal of becoming a Master Roaster to Jeff and Kate.

The more opportunity and training Jeff gave Guy, the harder he worked. He has a very high work ethic, and was willing to do the dirty work before moving on to the more glamorous. He was open to making all efforts. Jeff says “People who want without giving would find it hard to work in this roastery. Particularly with such a small staff, employees have to pay their dues, or it can polarize the group.”

Jeff worked side by side with Guy in a meticulous process of building Guy’s skills towards Master Roaster level. Guy gained Master certification in five years. Jeff spent a lot of time watching how Guy learned. Jeff appreciates that everyone has to make mistakes, but they also have to learn from them. He believes strongly in realistic and genuine feedback. He says “Personalities need to mesh, but they don’t have to be alike. Guy’s intellect was able to handle everything I gave him. Listening has been key. Guy is so enthusiastic and hard-working; I needed to make sure I didn’t burn him out. We have gotten to a place where we can read each other. We have solid communication.”

Mentoring changes as the scope of responsibilities changes, and Guy has an ever-expanding scope. He has now grown to the point where he is responsible for day-to-day orders and making sure the roastery runs well.

Mentoring in a roastery setting is challenging because of the constant and varied deadlines: roasting, blending, invoicing, getting the coffee out the door and into the van, delivering, keeping the physical facility clean and operating correctly. “Shared pressure builds trust,” says Jeff. Shared responsibility does, as well. Everyone does everything. “If a new staff member gets tired of putting out the trash or labeling bags in a couple of weeks, it is probably not going to work out, because we all do that.”

Regular communication ensures that all staff are working in coordination, and learning as much as they can from each other. Jeff adds that technology is a great support to mentoring. Rather than e-mail being an impersonal tool, he finds it to be an efficient way to keep everyone updated. It enhances face-to-face interactions.

Mentoring at the roastery is a long-term process for everyone, with give and take on all sides. Guy and other seasoned roastery staff members are now mentoring a new employee. They make sure she does not “get stuck with the grunt work” while making sure they do not throw complex tasks at her until she has mastered the basics. Skills must be built incrementally. It takes six months for someone to be fairly independent, a year to be truly independent. Why are employees patient with such a long learning curve? Jeff says “When they see the big picture and experience our culture of values, they understand. That’s what mentoring is all about.”