

Firm Supports Protégés Through Inclusive Mentorship

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SUMMARY

Symmes, Maini & McKee Associates launched their mentorship program in 2002. Their program matches protégés with senior level management for one year intervals. The program's success relies on its voluntary status and the framework committee's matching system.

ONE-ON-ONE MENTORING, FACILITATED

The SMMA Mentorship Program is a one-year program that matches select employees one-on-one with senior-level colleagues for formal facilitated mentoring. SMMA, a multidisciplinary A/E firm, encourages participation from all employees and involves three sets of partners: the protégés; the mentors; and a framework committee that makes the matches and facilitates program events. The committee comprises eight volunteers—most of whom have participated in the program as either a mentor or a protégé—and is facilitated by the SMMA director of human resources.

SMMA launched the Mentorship Program in 2002 to address the individual professional development and career goals of protégés. About 15 protégés per year take part in the program, which helps them to learn more about the firm and their career paths within the firm, better preparing them for future roles. It supports individuals' continuous improvement, and the mentors enjoy the opportunity to advance the profession and train their future peers. The introduction of mentor-protégé relationships at SMMA has built trust and solidified internal relationships, aiding in the retention of key staff.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH

The program has four elements: matching, meetings, support groups, and a reception.

Matching. The matching activity is critical. All SMMA employees receive an invitation to participate as protégés. They are asked to list their personal goals for the program and to rank their preferences for a mentor. The protégés can select anyone from any level and any department within the firm. Because mentoring is one-on-one, mentors cannot be shared.

Before the selection process begins, both the protégés and the mentors are reminded of the qualities needed to successfully fulfill their respective halves of the partnership. Ideally protégés possess an eagerness to learn; they are risk takers, with a positive attitude and outlook. The best mentors are supportive, secure in their positions, effective teachers, and good motivators. Mentors and protégés alike need to be patient, to be respectful of others, and to share a value of their work and the firm.

With those considerations in mind, the framework committee makes the matches. Once the protégés have submitted their requests, the committee meets, reviews their goals and preferences, and matches them with a mentor, honoring top rankings whenever possible. The director of human resources then approaches the selected mentors to confirm their willingness and availability to serve their matched protégé and then confirms the matches with the protégés.

Meetings. Once the matches are made, a kickoff gathering jump-starts the "getting to know you" phase of the relationships. The committee recommends that the pairs meet at least once a month, preferably away from the office to minimize distractions. Participants are expected to meet on their own time, and the firm reimburses any expenses incurred during the meetings, up to \$500 per pair per year. Pairs have lunched, dined, skied, sailed, golfed, toured project sites, gone to museums, taken architectural tours, and the like.

Each pair is responsible for setting up their own meetings. The early meetings are used to set up expectations for the partnership. The protégé shares his or her goals with the mentor and together they develop a timeline for achieving those goals, which should be measurable to the extent possible.

Support groups. Facilitated by the framework committee, the groups of mentors and protégés each meet separately every quarter for progress reports. The participants share success stories and obstacles they've encountered. If at any time during the year-long program either member of a pair feels

that things cannot work out, there are provisions for a “no-fault divorce.”

Reception. The program concludes with a cocktail reception that brings all participants together for a celebration. It provides a time to reflect upon the accomplishments of the previous year. The informal setting sets the tone for the continuation of many of the partnerships beyond the limits of the formal program.

MAKE IT VOLUNTARY

The SMMA Mentorship Program is partly formal, partly informal. All participants—mentors and protégés alike—are volunteers. That they *want* to be a part of the program and are not forced into it is the single largest factor contributing to the program’s ongoing success. The second largest factor is the care the framework committee gives to making appropriate matches and facilitating the support groups all year. Since the program’s inception in 2002, 49 out of 59 protégés have been matched with their first or second choice.

Each year the program concludes with a survey in which each participant identifies the degree to which his or her goals have been met. Participants also suggest enhancements to the program. As a result of their recommendations, the program has continued to evolve and improve each year. Originally limited to a protégé pool of Associate-level employees, the program was opened up to all staff after their first year. Asking protégés to identify their goals prior to the start of the program has not only helped the committee in making appropriate matches but has also raised the level of commitment the protégés exhibit.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic

- 03.02.01 Mentoring Interns: A Firm Commitment
- 03.02.03 Seek Out the Many Rewards of Mentoring
- 03.02.04 Mentoring as a Team Sport

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Staff Development” by Laurie Dreyer-Hadley and Kathleen C. Maurel, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 9, page 242.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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