



AIA Best Practices:

The benefits of a mentorship program in your local chapter

Contributed by Jason Takeuchi, AIA, NCARB

Summary

AIA Honolulu's 5x5x5 Mentorship Program has produced an immediate positive impact on its local chapter for little to no cost. Due to its flexibility and potential, the program has attracted interest from other AIA chapters nationwide.

Introduction

Mentorship programs are beneficial not only for their participants but also for local AIA chapters, regardless of their size. AIA Honolulu has gained both immediate and long-term benefits from its 5x5x5 Mentorship Program:

- Increased Associate AIA and AIA memberships annually.
- New engagement with allied professionals such as contractors, developers, landscape architects, and business managers.
- New leadership opportunities for emerging professionals.
- Minimal operational cost and increased chapter revenue.

How it works

5x5x5: Five groups each consisting of five mentees meet with one of five different mentors every one or two months. The program concludes when they have met all five mentors over eight to 10 months; this allows each participant to meet all five mentors once, rather than being paired with a single mentor throughout the year. A group coordinator responsible for scheduling determines the best meeting dates for everyone and facilitates conversation during sessions.

Participants: Eligible mentees are Associate AIA, AIA, or Allied members of any experience level or profession; non-AIA members are ineligible. AIA Honolulu participants are typically new architecture school graduates, recent transplants to Honolulu, or professionals seeking to establish strong relationships in the industry. The five mentees assigned to each group have similar experience levels but diverse backgrounds.

Mentors: Three architects and two allied professionals are selected annually, creating a diverse mentor pool of industry leaders that also includes contractors, marketing managers, landscape architects, and developers. Effort is also made to ensure that diverse genders and ethnicities are represented.

Mentorship sessions: Location, duration, and topics discussed are determined by the mentor. Conversations are candid and provide mentees a safe forum for open discussion of the profession, social issues, business and legal aspects of architecture, and personal goals. Sessions are held with a different mentor each time at a restaurant or office on weekday evenings over food and beverages.

Cost: Enrollment costs \$50 for the five sessions. This includes an introductory happy hour session held at the Center for Architecture, which is sponsored by a donor. The \$50 fee successfully balances an emerging professional's budget with an emotional investment to attend all five sessions. When all 25 spots are filled, it also generates \$1,250 in revenue for the local chapter.

Flexibility: The program can be scaled to a 4x4x4 or 3x3x3 format depending on chapter size, member interest, and schedule availability. If mentees cannot attend a session, they can make up the time at another group's session. Availability of a center for architecture is inessential; sessions can be held entirely at principal firms, restaurants, or other public venues.

Impact

Immediate results of implementation of the 5x5x5 Mentorship Program:

- New AIA memberships were generated annually from non-members who joined the AIA specifically to participate in the 5x5x5 Program. Although this group includes full AIA members, many recent graduates looking for an immediate connection to the AIA and employment opportunities joined the AIA as Associate AIA members to participate.
- AIA Colorado coordinated with AIA Honolulu to develop its own version of a 5x5x5 mentorship program. Its version includes additional features such as an application process and establishing groups based on interest. AIA Colorado has since developed a 3x3x3 model in a sister chapter.
- Mentees developed relationships with program mentors, which led to actual employment opportunities and career shifts. For example, one architect who engaged in a mentorship session with the head of a large construction company reconnected with the mentor two years later when seeking employment. Due to the rapport established during the initial mentorship session, the architect was offered a position at the mentor's company.
- Allied members previously not engaged with AIA Honolulu became affiliated with the organization, which has strengthened AIA Honolulu's relationship with sister organizations. Participants in the 5x5x5 Program now include members of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), American Society of Heating Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE), U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), and Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA).
- Emerging professionals have built a new community of colleagues outside of their firms, which had led to increased attendance at AIA Honolulu events and programs. This group also includes recent transplants to Honolulu who have met dozens of peers through the program.

- Beyond meeting new people, the program has spurred candid and meaningful conversations internally about what it's like to work in other firms, locations, or even other disciplines. Some discussions have even touched on social aspects of practice, such as conflict resolution and equity.
- New leadership opportunities were instantly created, which makes the program an ideal training ground for further leadership roles in the chapter. In 2017, many program participants formed AIA Honolulu's first-ever Emerging Professionals Committee.
- Mentors were eager to participate, so much so that it became difficult to narrow down the many who were interested to five mentors each year. For the mentors the program became a form of reverse mentorship, allowing them to learn about the trends and interests of the millennial generation.

Starting a mentorship program in your chapter

Mentorship programs are successful when member goals are aligned and there are willing volunteers to support the effort. They are especially successful when they provide emerging professionals with desired social opportunities. Here are tips for individual members who want to start a program in their chapter:

- Assemble a reliable committee that will provide long-term support
- Seek mentors who engage well with mentees but also possess substantive credentials. Mentors are effective when they focus on individual mentee development, not on themselves. Recruit at least one mentor with whom participants would pay \$50 just to interact.
- Pay individual attention to all program participants. Because many of them wish to be a part of community of peers, every effort made to be as inclusive as possible will go a long way.
- Reserve program slots for AIA members only. Non-members have traditionally joined the AIA in order to participate in the program.

Conclusion

Mentorship programs, regardless of their format, can immediately become critical elements for local AIA chapters when volunteers, leaders, and participants work together to implement and sustain them. Chapters currently without mentorship programs stand to gain from both the anticipated and unforeseen benefits AIA Honolulu has reaped from its 5x5x5 Mentorship Program.

About the contributor

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