



AIA Best Practices: Formal mentoring goals and guidelines

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Summary

Chances are, most people have had—or have been—a mentor at one time or another, whether they realized it or not. The mentor-protégé relationship benefits both parties through reciprocal sharing of knowledge, insights, and skills.

The argument for mentoring

Young designers enter the workforce with academic knowledge, design theory, and technical skills but often little experience with project organization and management techniques. One way to mend the gap is with a fulfilling mentorship. Mentors can show their protégés the big picture and clarify the practice of architecture.

Through feedback and constructive criticism, the mentor will help develop a more informed employee.

Traditional mentor relationships develop informally, usually as a result of physical proximity, common interests, or specialties. The informal approach lacks structure and is more focused on relationship building and long-term knowledge transfer from mentor to protégé.

However, more structured mentor-protégé scenarios have started to develop. As more firms realize the tangible benefits of mentoring, they are beginning to pair and group senior employees with protégés more often.

At the national level, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) values this type of relationship and requires both a supervisor and mentor to sign off on all Intern Development Program (IDP) employment verification forms. These formally arranged groups are just as successful, provided that they follow guidelines and goals, as described below.

Goals and guidelines

In a formal mentor-protégé situation, structure and relationship are integral to each person's fulfillment.

Set clear expectations. It is difficult to judge the effects of changes—positive or negative—without understandable expectations. Both the mentor and protégé should write their goals for the relationship and how they hope to achieve them, along with a timeline.

Meet regularly. The best way to monitor positive change in professional behavior is to provide regular assessment and encouragement, to give the process real value. If regular check-ins do not occur, protégés are unlikely to recognize any positive and measurable change in their performance.

Stay positive. Effective mentoring relationships help build a strong sense of self-confidence. They also help build perspective for both parties—highlighting where each person started and their future direction. Mentor programs can also reinforce a company's strategic path and provide an outlet for discussion.

Use existing resources. An ideal mentor is someone who knows the protégé and his or her desired career path. If mentors are familiar with the people and politics of the office, they can provide unique insight into others' motivations. By serving as a link between the protégé and senior management, a mentor's perspective and guidance can steer employees toward better work practices and interpersonal communication.

Develop trust. Protégés and mentors must create a safe setting where protégés can ask questions without being judged for not knowing the answers. Mentors need to know the protégé can be entrusted with the responsibility that comes with additional information. Without this foundation of trust, it is easy to doubt motivations and impinge on the learning process.

Ensure a good fit. For firms that want to encourage formal relationships, there must be both an adjustment period and an evaluation of whether the relationship is meeting its goals. If the partnering is not a success, try again by redefining goals or with a different partner. Sometimes groups click and sometimes they don't. There is always the possibility you will make a positive impact with another pairing.

Remember that you get more than you give. Serving as a mentor can reenergize your spirit and passion for your work. A protégé's fresh pair of eyes can shed new light on existing organizational or behavioral challenges. The satisfaction from helping someone succeed will yield great joy, not only because have you helped them achieve their goals but also because you and your company may benefit as well. You may even learn about a new skill you didn't know existed.

About the contributor

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