

Mentor is the New Leader

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I recently met the owner of a small engineering firm. We were talking about developing the younger engineers in his firm and he mentioned that one of his retired engineers comes in once a week, has his own office, and his sole responsibility is to mentor the younger employees. The owner said this mentor will review their work, offer suggestions, and bolster their confidence by saying things like, “you can tackle this one on your own, I know you can.”

The best part, the owner of the company shared with me, was that this experienced engineer has the time and the enthusiasm to do the one-on-one coaching that he himself doesn't have time to do.

I was so impressed with the process this company developed that I wanted to share it with you and... it got me thinking about roles in organizations. Why do we label “manager,” or “director,” or COO as the pinnacle of one's career. Why not add another role after the day-to-day responsibilities have been passed on to one's successor? Why not make “mentor” the final role one fulfills in a company?

This is a particularly good time to address the possibility of utilizing the wisdom of your more seasoned employees in a new way because the “Great Resignation” has left many AEC firms grappling with vacancies, impacting project timelines, client relationships, efficiency, and profitability. In addition, a less apparent impact is the loss of leadership capability and institutional knowledge. According to a CNN Business report from December 2021, 90 percent of workers who left the



workforce due to the pandemic, with no intention of returning, were over the age of 55.

We've lost invaluable wisdom and expertise from our organizations, and it's not just due to the pandemic. Just this week I spoke to another firm owner who shared that three very experienced employees have retired in the last few months including one who called HR one Monday morning and said, “this is my last day.”

What if... after holding “boots on the ground” leadership positions for a decade or so, we move those senior-level professionals out of direct project work and into advising as mentors. In this new role, their sole responsibility would be to consultatively support and guide the leaders who have replaced them or anyone in the company looking for

experience and knowledge that they lack.

In my perfect world imagination, your firm's more experienced employees would have a dedicated space in the office with private meeting rooms where they would consult confidentially with anyone who came in asking for help. When they arrive in the "mentor zone" the mentees are greeted by a coordinator who asks a few intake questions to help match them with the best person for the query.

Mentoring relationships might be a simple one-time conversation, such as a site supervisor asking for advice on how to manage trade partner conflicts, or more long-term, such as a junior estimator meeting weekly with their mentor to discuss factors that affect risk, profit and loss, etc. Individuals might also have multiple mentors for different needs. For instance, having one mentor they meet with daily who helps them to navigate the complexity of a large-scale project while meeting quarterly with another mentor who advises them on professional development and preparing for their next career move within the organization.

In the face of an ever-changing business environment, companies would benefit greatly from making space and time to transfer knowledge from more experienced cohorts to newer ones by making mentoring a core part of the business. And leaders in AEC would not have had a truly "successful career" unless their final job title was mentoring the next generation. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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