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Mentoring in compliance: Building and sustaining critical relationships

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Almost everyone attributes at least some of their success to the mentors who helped along the career journey, and there are widely varying definitions and expectations about what mentoring is and is not. For the purposes of this article, mentoring is the act of providing support, insights, and guidance for someone else in a business context. Mentors are often found outside one's own organization or even one's own enterprise.

Mentorships can be formal or informal, but in any form a mentoring relationship takes, it can have a profound effect. The joy of mentoring includes a feeling of exhilaration that you are helping shape someone's development and helping them grow. The protégé can also be given advice and connections that allow them to reach heights that might have been more challenging without the support.

Compliance as a relatively new profession hasn't had the history with mentoring that other areas, such as academia or science professions, have had. To help guide the formation and healthy development of mentoring relationships in the compliance profession, here are a few keys to success.

Mentoring is an investment by both parties

Mentoring is a commitment of time and energy for everyone involved. When you have a mentor, it's the job of the mentee to drive goals, cultivate the relationship, seek out advice, and be responsive to the relationship. The mentor also needs to commit to being available, being thoughtful and "present."

Relationships are constantly evolving and must be tended to by everyone. The ongoing relationship and discussions at the start of mentoring build the bond necessary for longer-term growth and development. Preparation is key, and both parties should be prepared in advance and mindful about the use of each other's time.

Alignment around goals and measurement of progress

Starting out strong in a mentoring relationship involves some heavy logistics in the early stages, including agreeing on issues such as when, where, and how frequently to meet, as well as how long and why you are meeting. Listening to the goals and expectations for each party is key to the success of the mentoring relationship. It is also important to set appropriate boundaries—some of the content that a compliance professional may be exposed to at work would not necessarily lend itself to being discussed outside of work. Be clear on what you can and cannot share.

By setting those initial goals, you can use them to assess progress and success. It is critical to enable quick wins to keep all parties feeling motivated and encouraged, which can in turn lead to even more positive outcomes and growth. No matter which metrics are chosen, make sure that you track progress in a supportive way and follow through on any commitments made to ensure the success of the relationship. You will find the compliance metrics and dashboards that you prepare as part of your compliance job to be excellent training grounds for the mentoring relationship.

Experienced perspectives are invaluable at any stage of a career

The best training resource during a mentoring relationship is the firsthand experiences of each party. Most of us learn things more quickly if we have a context or story in which to fit them, and many times people can share their hard-earned experience to help avoid trial and error or critical missteps.

Sharing experiences should be done with a sense of humility—the relationship is not all about you. We are all fallible and flawed people. Not every journey is a linear progression. By sharing your experiences, you can enrich the other party's understanding of the subject matter, as well as give them permission to learn from their own experiences.

The best mentor relationships identify blind spots

Every individual has their own strengths and weaknesses. A mentoring relationship can certainly help make your strengths even stronger, but it's usually even more valuable to have someone else who can give advice in areas you aren't familiar with or where you're struggling.

Blind spots and gaps in your skill set can happen at every stage of a career. You may be a very experienced compliance professional who hasn't yet worked much with the new generation of workplace job entrants or are not as current on the use of social media. You may be new to the profession and not as aware or experienced with some of the new compliance topics you have been asked to cover. Perhaps you are transitioning into a new role, but have extensive experience in a different subject matter or a different field altogether. Regardless of what your story is, it's important to note that you have an opportunity to learn from absolutely everyone you meet, and you should always strive to do so.

If you go through life with the perspective that you can (and should) have something to learn from everyone you meet, you will collect many informal mentors along the way. Seek out those who are different from you; don't ever look for a mentoring relationship with someone who is your clone.

Live your professional standards

Effective mentoring relationships are grounded on the values of trust and respect, the hallmarks of integrity for any professional relationship and an area of key importance for compliance professionals. Always serve as a role model, maintaining high standards of professionalism in all interactions. This includes keeping discussions as confidential as the law permits so that discussions with you are a place of psychological safety. Mutual trust allows those involved to share new ideas and express confusion, frustration, or concern as they feel them. A "safe" environment allows this to happen in a way that might be uncomfortable or inappropriate to reveal in larger settings or with one's direct manager. Mentoring should create a safe place to ask questions and discuss uncertainties without judgment.

Practice active listening and observation before advising

When you are engaged and vested in the success of the mentoring relationship, it's natural to be eager to jump in

and assist with any challenges raised. Resist the urge to act and make decisions on someone else's behalf, and instead do the difficult task of listening.

Strive to always be an empathetic listener and observer, and put effort into listening and observing before you offer advice. This will help you slow down and focus, as well as gain information and clarity about the situation. Be attentive and analytical, seeking to understand the perspectives brought forward. In the process, you will get the opportunity to be a sounding board and guide.

As part of the process, it is important to always challenge excuses. Oftentimes, when someone gets overwhelmed, it's easy to lose sight of existing goals. As a part of the mentoring relationship, you should be helping your counterpart honestly assess their performance, perceptions, and potential biases.

The feedback loop goes both ways

Providing feedback must be done in a way that is helpful to the recipient to ensure that your feedback is useful and heard. Recognize the other person's strengths and progress, especially if you notice leadership qualities, self-starting, growth mind-set, or any other areas of strength that represent qualities that can be grown and developed.

If you have constructive criticism, choose the time and place for communicating these observations carefully and listen closely to the response. Hearing about "areas of opportunity" is hard to swallow for most people, but a caring delivery of the message with a positive and nonreactive response to resolving setbacks will help develop resilience and persistence.

Seeking feedback allows even a reluctant person to feel enabled by explicit permission to address challenges early on and learn something important in the process.

Celebrate progress, maintain gratitude, and end with support

In the middle of change, it is hard to keep the end in mind. Oftentimes, people give up on changes in their own habits too quickly and before seeing the benefits from the new practices. Help each other see the positive changes being achieved through the mentoring relationship.

When ending each conversation, embrace the positive and support the successes to ensure that both the mentor and mentee are fueled for their next interactions. Communicating thanks for the relationship and gratitude for having the other person in the mentoring relationship greatly aides the virtuous cycle of giving.

Mentoring is an active interaction and requires ongoing thought, active participation, and transparency and honesty in all you say and do, regardless of whether you are the mentor or the mentee. Much like any other relationship, mentoring involves give and take, adjustment and insight, compassion and honesty, and presence of mind and spirit to be successful. Mentoring relationships can be medium-term or long-term, narrow or broad, but being clear about expectations and honest about what you hear will increase the chance of getting the most out of each interaction you have.

About the authors

Lisa Beth is a legal and compliance leader that has found success in the government, public, and private companies by connecting, advising, and educating diverse populations while aligning them with a common purpose furthering the enterprise vision. Lisa Beth has enjoyed being a mentor as well as being mentored by others throughout her career.

Daniel helps build valuable customer trust in products, services, and brands through the use of transparency, security, and privacy as competitive differentiators. Daniel also mentors technologists as they enter security, privacy, and compliance leadership roles to better speak the language of the business.

Takeaways

- Investing in mentoring relationships is a critical growth and development priority for all participants.
- Mentoring is valuable at all phases and stages of a career.
- Diversity in mentoring helps you identify strengths and gaps.
- Living your professional standards is a key element of mentoring leadership.
- In the best of mentoring relationships, everyone receives feedback.

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