

Mentoring as a Component of Leadership Development

East Bay Municipal Utility District
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Background Information on East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD)

The East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) is a public utility established in 1923 under California's Municipal Utility District Act. EBMUD has a proud history of providing high-quality drinking water for 1.3 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The District's award-winning wastewater treatment protects San Francisco Bay and serves 640,000 customers. EBMUD employs approximately 1,850 full time employees.

How EBMUD Set Priorities for Leadership Development

In 2000, in response to increasing awareness of national forecasts regarding the impact of baby boomer retirements on the work force, a team of HR staff began to think more seriously about workforce planning and preparing for the waves of retirement we would certainly be facing. In 2003 we analyzed District workforce demographics and projected EBMUD retirements by job groups based on a calculation of retirement eligibility (based on age and longevity). This analysis allowed us to identify where in our organization we were most likely to experience the first waves of retirements. The numbers were essential to getting the attention of management so that workforce planning would be recognized as a strategic priority. Up to this point, the main focus of employee development had been to provide training to help people do their current jobs better. Embarking on a new direction for employee development, we began to develop programs to prepare the next generation of leaders. Our primary goal was to create a pool of internal candidates that would be better prepared to make the transition to the leadership positions which would inevitably open up. Our initial efforts focused on developing field supervisors, where the numbers showed we could potentially lose 65% of our staff in the next 5 years.

Once we were committed to creating leadership development programs, we recognized the importance of including a mentoring component in these programs. Mentoring and coaching became an integral part of the District's larger workforce development initiatives supporting our efforts to develop employees better prepared take on the challenges of leadership today and in the future.

EBMUD's Approach to Mentoring

Background on the Leadership Academies

Below are the steps we followed in creating our leadership development academies:

- Identified the anticipated vacancies, as we did in our original analysis;
- Analyzed the work done by staff in those positions;
- Identified the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's), or competencies that are present in our best candidates, and what competencies we desire for the future;
- Identified the people in feeder classes, or candidate pools to see what competencies they already have;
- Identified the gap between what we have and what we need;
- Created plans to fill the gap.

The leadership academies are the major component of the District's plan to fill the gap between where we are with regards to the skill level of employees likely to be competing for supervisory and management positions, and where we want them to be.

From the initial academy which focused on preparing journey level employees to move into first line supervisory positions, we went on to develop two other academies to address development needs at different levels of the organization.

The LEAD Academy was our first program. As mentioned earlier, we anticipated the retirement of 65 % of first line supervisors in our operations and maintenance and field areas. LEAD prepared us to address those projected vacancies. The strong success of LEAD was a proof of our concept, and garnered strong management support for designing the Pathways Academy to address our next anticipated need for Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent positions. Building on what we learned from the first two academies, the Management Leadership Academy (MLA) focused on preparing employees for our highest level management positions of division managers and directors.

Objectives of the Leadership Academies

The Academies share three principal objectives:

- To prepare for the future by building a human resource "pipeline" of candidates qualified to compete for expected openings;
- To enhance the quality of new leaders by shaping their skill set, and in turn shaping the culture;
- To promote development as everyone's responsibility—i.e., the responsibility of employees themselves, their supervisors and managers, as well as HR staff;
- To address changing expectations for leaders due to changes in technology, the financial environment, increased regulations and customer expectations, and the workforce itself.

The following structure supports achieving the desired outcomes:

- Participants are screened for readiness through a competitive application and selection process.
- To ensure personal commitment, employees are expected to commit personal time to participate. They attend some of the workshops on their own time and are responsible for completing homework.
- The classroom training covers “generic” skills gaps. For example, Communications Skills, Emotional Intelligence, and Conflict Management. The course work is not technically specific because participants come from diverse fields. Departments/work units are expected to be responsible for technical training.

Academy Components

The Academies also share basic components:

Cohort group: The cohort model means that participants go through all classes together as a group. This approach to learning promotes mutual support among peers and supports the development of a strong network of professional relationships. The cohort format acknowledges the expertise each individual brings to the class and creates an environment where learning from each other is encouraged and valued.

Core training curriculum: Moving up the organizational ladder involves making a transition from a functional specialist to proficient supervisor and manager. A successful transition requires a shift in thinking and greater reliance on leadership versus technical skills. The academy curriculum focuses on building leadership skills by exposing participants to the latest concepts, techniques and applications in management and leadership. Sample courses include Emotional Intelligence, Dialogue, Managing Conflict, Critical Thinking, Business Writing, and Situational Leadership.

Orientation: The Academies begin with a “Kick Off Orientation” which is in part used as a congratulatory celebration of the beginning to build anticipation and enthusiasm, while providing an opportunity for participants and mentors to get to know each other more. The orientation serves two additional purposes: First, to establish a common foundation where we present the big picture of what the academy entails, including schedule of courses and requirements for successful completion. Secondly, to clarify the roles and expectations for the mentoring relationships.

Assessments: Assessments are used as a tool to help participants increase self awareness and provide valuable information for creating the Individual Development Plans (IDP). Diverse instruments are available and include self assessments that help people better understand work styles and preferences (DiSC), and identify core strengths (the VIA Strengths Inventory). For the higher level academies (Pathways and MLA), we also use 360 assessments to provide feedback from multiple raters at different levels. Feedback from the assessments help participants identify both strengths and skills gaps that become the focus of the goals and development activities identified in the IDP.

Individual Development Plans: Participants create Individual Development Plans (IDP’s) to address their personal learning needs. The IDP identifies skills gaps, builds on strengths, establishes goals for learning and development, and identifies specific

development activities participants are willing to commit to. The IDP also helps provide a focus for mentoring meetings.

Mentoring/Coaching: Participants are matched with an experienced District leader who meets with them regularly and is a resource for identifying practical applications for the classroom learning. Mentors help participants develop broader perspectives and a greater understanding of the District, while also providing support for staying on track to meet the development goals identified in the IDP.

Graduation Celebration: The closing festivity, which is attended by the mentors/coaches, relevant department managers, and the General Manager, celebrates the success of the participants while providing them increased visibility in front of future hiring managers.

The Mentoring/Coaching Components

With an understanding of mentoring and coaching as integral parts of our leadership development academies, rather than stand alone programs, we can now focus in more detail on the mentoring and coaching component.

Using Internal Mentors/Coaches

One of the first decisions we made was to use internal mentors/coaches. The District chose to use internal staff to ensure that key practical information about how the organization works was communicated to the next generation of leaders. Also, internal mentors/coaches do not cost as much money “out-of-pocket.” We had also had success with earlier mentoring programs (e.g., engineering internship program) to suggest that it would be workable and add value to the leadership academies.

Because our mentors/coaches are essentially novices, they are supervisors and managers who have either volunteered or been volunteered for this assignment, we do not expect the same level of return from them as we would if we were using professional coaches. We don’t expect perfection, we expect improvement. For all the academies, we’ve seen observable, qualitative improvement in mentoring and coaching skills.

Before providing further detail of the mentoring/coaching component, let us clarify how we use the terms “mentor” and “coach.” We use the following definition for mentor:

A mentor is a trusted and credible leader who works with a partner to help them learn things more quickly or earlier, or to learn things they otherwise might not have learnt. The mentor has a breadth and depth of experience that the mentee does not have at the present stage in their career. The mentor is willing to share his/her knowledge, experience and insight and be a source of inspiration and influence because s/he enjoys developing people. (Shea, 1994)

We further identify what mentors *do*. Mentors teach, coach, guide, encourage, sponsor and partner.

We use the term “mentors” for the partners of the participants of the LEAD Academy. As mentioned earlier, LEAD prepares journey level employees for the first step up the supervisory ladder. LEAD employees are striving to make the transition “from buddy to boss” and presumably have limited supervisory experience. At this level we recognize the role of the partner will involve more teaching and specific guidance. To emphasize this we refer to those partners as *mentors*, though we recognize that one of the things that mentors do is *coach*.

By contrast, the partners of the participants of the Pathways and Management Leadership Academies (MLA) are working with employees who are generally already supervisors. In the case of the MLA, some of the participants are division managers interested in preparing for the role of Department Directors. For MLA participants, the coaches are our Department Directors, who represent the highest level of the organization below the General Manager. We believe their partnering relationship involves less teaching and hands on guidance and significantly more coaching in the sense of the coach being a *thinking partner*. (Rock, 2006). We choose to emphasize this aspect of the role by calling these partners *coaches* rather than *mentors*.

For ease of reading in the rest of this section I will refer primarily to “mentors,” which as emphasized above includes a coaching role.

The mentoring relationships support development and growth for program participants, as well as facilitating the transfer of organizational knowledge. Mentors supplement concepts and tools presented in the classroom by sharing their experiences. They offer real-world applications and perspectives. For example, mentors can take their mentees to supervisory or management staff meetings the mentee would not normally attend. They can provide tour of facilities. They can involve them in budget preparation and selection interviews. They can help them expand their network by introducing them to other supervisors and managers.

Mentors also act as thinking partners who help employees develop their own innovation and problem solving skills. Rather than immediately providing advice on how they would approach a problem, mentors are encouraged to ask open ended questions to help generate insight. For example, a mentor might ask: “How have you thought about approaching it?” “What are other alternatives?” “What might be the consequences?” etc. *before* offering advice about how they would solve the problem. This method supports the mentees in becoming better thinkers, while helping the build confidence in their own ability to solve problems. (Rock, 2006)

Mentoring relationships provide additional structure for the development experience, which supplements class room training. Regular sessions with mentors provide participants with an opportunity to discuss the applications of concepts and techniques presented in class with someone who has organizational knowledge and management experience. While mentoring provides accountability, it does not involve evaluation. Mentors are not matched with anyone in their chain of command. Mentors are not

judging or “grading” their partners. This makes it a safer context to take risks and focus on learning.

The Mentor Matching Process

Volunteer mentors are recruited primarily from the departments that are participating in the Academy. We encourage managers and other mentors to personally recruit new mentors. Being asked by your manager or colleague to become a mentor is much more compelling than having the Mentoring Coordinator (an HR staff member) propose the idea. The Coordinator then provides follow up contact, answers questions about the specifics of the mentoring program and tries to build on the interest generated to gain the potential volunteer’s commitment. In essence we complement personal recruitment by managers and colleagues with personal follow up by the Mentoring Coordinator.

We recruit the same number of mentors as we have participants. As mentioned above, mentors are not matched with an employee in their line of supervision so that they do not play a role in evaluating their mentees. Mentors complete a Mentor Profile form, which has basic information about them, including work experience and areas of expertise. The forms are sent electronically to program participants before the Academy Kick Off and Mentoring Orientation. This gives participants an opportunity to review the forms and identify some of the people they might be particularly interested in being matched with. After the Orientation participants identify in rank order 5 people they would like to be matched with and anyone they feel they could not work with. Mentors identify only anyone they would NOT want to be matched with. The Mentoring Program Coordinator uses these preferences to make the final matches, attempting to ensure that all the participants (mentees) are assigned to one of the 5 people they indicated a preference for.

Skills Required for Mentoring

We have identified the following skills as fundamental to successful mentoring and coaching. (For this section, see Whitworth, et al., 2007)

Listening: Listening is the first of the foundational skills for mentoring. Mentors/coaches need to listen deeply to hear their partner’s agenda (rather than their own), and recognize their partner’s vision, values and purpose.

Practicing self management: Self management is required for developing listening skills. By this we mean managing all the talk in your head that keeps you from being present to really listen when someone else is speaking. The talk in your head includes judgment (“That’s a stupid idea! Why would he think that?”); diversions (“I really prefer to be working on my presentation for tomorrow.”); your own story (“Something like this happened to me two years ago. ... He should do what I did.”)

Mentors also need to practice self management to avoid an automatic response of advice giving where their mentee presents a challenge. Self management allows mentors to keep from doing the problem solving and instead support their mentees in coming up with their own solutions.

Asking powerful questions: Powerful questions are open ended questions that “evoke clarity, action, discovery, insight or commitment. ... (and) create greater possibility, new learning or clearer vision.” Samples of powerful questions are: “What do you want?” “What’s next?” “How will you start?”

Providing feedback: Effective feedback is wanted, direct, timely, and non judgmental. Feedback is used to promote greater self awareness and clarity, deepen the learning and support skills development.

Supporting accountability: Accountability encourages employees to take ownership for their actions and recognize their own responsibility for continuous learning, growth and career development. One important way mentors promote accountability is by helping their partners develop action plans: *You will do what by when and tell me about it.* Mentors provide non judgmental follow up to commitments made during mentoring sessions. If the mentee does not meet a commitment that becomes the basis for a discussion that is explored in the mentoring session in a way that encourages further learning. Using powerful questions, the mentor can ask, “What got in the way of you completing this?” “What do you want to do know?” “How further obstacles are you likely to face?” “How can you be prepared for those challenges?” etc.

Mentoring Training and Support

Since we are using volunteer in house mentors we recognize the group represents diverse skill levels. We support mentoring skills development through a mentoring orientation, formal mentor training, monthly mentor roundtables and on going support provided by the Mentoring Coordinator.

The Mentoring Orientation: Both mentors and participants attend the Mentoring Orientation, which comes right after the brief, celebratory program Kick Off. The orientation is the first time that all mentors and participants are together. It is designed to be highly interactive and fun, and give employees a chance to get to know each other more. At the end of the orientation participants provide the names of 5 mentors they would like to be matched with. (See “Matching Process” above).

In addition to providing the opportunity for networking, the orientation covers the following topics:

- The goals of the mentoring component: to provide support, share expertise and promote greater accountability.
- The roles and respective responsibilities of the mentors and the mentees.
- The Mentoring Guidelines / Protocols
 - Partners agree to meet a minimum of 2-4 hours per month.
 - Partners will work together for 6-12 months (depending on the Academy)
 - Partners will maintain confidentiality about what is discussed in the mentoring sessions.

- A “no fault divorce” is available to partners if after making an effort they still feel they cannot successfully work together. (Note: We have never had to provide the “no fault divorce.”)
- Phases of Mentoring Relationship: Connect, Create, Close
- The Mentoring Partnership Agreement: This ensures that both partners have articulated their expectations for the mentoring relationship.
- Coaching Skills: Listening, Feedback, Accountability
- Creating the Individual Development Plans (IDP’s). Since we require that the participants create an IDP while they are in the Academy and we expect the mentors to provide input on the IDP, and support for the action plan identified, it is helpful to review the process for creating an IDP together at the beginning of the Academy.

Mentor Training: A week after the mentoring orientation, the mentors attend Mentor Training *by themselves* i.e., the participants/mentees are not present. This session provides an opportunity to review and clarify issues that might have been left over from the Mentoring Orientation. It is also a safe place for mentors to express some of their concerns about performing their mentoring roles skillfully.

The Mentor Training also includes training on the DiSC Style Inventory. Both the mentees and the mentors take the DiSC Assessment (in separate sessions). By understanding the concept of style preferences and learning their own style, mentors are better able to 1) consciously adapt their behavior to improve their effectiveness in interacting with their mentees; and 2) provide guidance and support to their mentees in how to adapt their behavior to become more effective in working with others.

Lastly, the Mentor Training is a venue for teaching and practicing basic coaching skills.

Mentor Roundtables: In addition to attending the program orientation and training, mentors meet once a month for Mentor Roundtables. The Roundtables establish a regular venue for program administrators to offer additional training, share updates and on-going feedback, clarify expectations and respond to questions, while providing a structure for mentors to learn from each others’ experiences and provide mutual support. Mentors bring their challenges to the Roundtables and learn from each other by sharing their perspectives and approaches. In this way, the Roundtables strengthen the support network among mentors, and promote a greater sense of confidence in their mentoring roles. Also, the Mentor Roundtables offer a setting for mentors to give timely on-going feedback to the program administrators. Feedback received through the Mentor Roundtables has allowed us to continuously evaluate and improve the academies rather than wait to the end of the program to realize we should have made changes. (See an example under “Lessons Learned”)

Challenges

The major challenges we have faced are:

Recruiting volunteers: Employees feel overburdened already and are reluctant to make an additional commitment of time. As we have emphasized, upper management support is essential for successful recruitment of volunteers. People are unlikely to prioritize

mentoring unless it is clear that they will have management support and recognition for the effort.

Matching: The mentoring literature emphasizes the importance of allowing mentees to choose their mentors. Although this would be ideal and supports greater commitment to the mentoring relationship by the mentee, it is not practical when you have a limited number of mentors. We give mentees input into the matching by asking them to state their preferences (5 people they would like to be matched with). We then assign the final match.

Motivation: Although we regularly promote the benefits of the mentoring relationships, and check in regularly with participants about how their relationships are going, we cannot mandate engagement in the use of the mentor. People who are most engaged will find ways to work through challenges with their matches. For example, in the Pathways Program, coaches were assigned. Two coaches found their backgrounds made them better suited to coach the others' partner so they developed an alternative arrangement (switched partners).

Coaching skills level: As mentioned earlier, since we are working with in house volunteer mentors, there are diverse skills levels. We try to address this by providing training, roundtables and on going support by the Mentoring Program Coordinator, who is available to meet with the mentors for individual coaching if they are facing challenges they prefer to discuss outside the Roundtable format.

We are all learning! Though we learned much from the literature on mentoring we did not have any obvious models to follow, or the resources to hire a consultant to create the program. We designed the mentoring program internally, from scratch. We are committed to learning and improving along the way. This requires staying open to feedback and being willing to make adjustments.

As a simple example, during the second academy we had created a homework chart to promote accountability about submitting homework in on time. The chart was posted for all participants to see. At one of the Mentor Roundtables, the mentors let us know that their mentees were complaining that the chart made them feel that they were back in grade school. The participants had been reluctant to provide this feedback directly to the program administrators. We considered the feedback and agreed that the chart was undermining some of our goals. We then came up with a different way to hold employees accountable for timely submittal of their homework assignments. We did not have to wait to hear the feedback at the end of the academy when we do a formal evaluation session. This approach allows us to make adjustments along the way to keep continuously improving the program.

However, sometimes you can't make changes mid way. For example, during the first Pathways Academy we made a commitment at the beginning of the program that the 360 assessment results would be kept confidential. Coaches told us that not having access to the assessment information limited their ability to provide useful feedback and guidance

about skills gaps and in creating the IDP's. We validated the coaches' perspective and said we would implement the idea for the following academy, but we did not feel we could change the rules mid way into the program.

It is worth noting here that openness to feedback and the willingness to make adjustments helps build trust and on going commitment for the program. We are very transparent about the revisions we make to the programs which are a result of feedback received. This demonstrates that we take feedback seriously and that it actually has an impact.

Benefits

Below are what we have found to be the most valuable and tangible benefits of mentoring:

- Mentoring promotes the value of learning throughout the organization. It involves learning for everyone. One of the rewards for the mentors is that they, too, learn from their mentees. They see the world from new perspectives, and often broaden their knowledge of the organization. Over 75% of our mentors volunteer to mentor again because they learn and find meaning from the experience.
- Mentoring supports development of a “pipeline of leaders.” Many academy graduates go on to become mentors or coaches to participants in later programs. They recognize the value they gained from mentoring and are motivated to in turn “give back” to those coming in the pipeline behind them.
- Mentoring builds a common vocabulary and values. Though the mentors are not attending classroom training with their partners they are being exposed to the concepts and tools presented in the training through the mentoring sessions and the Roundtables.
- Mentoring breaks down silos. Both partners gain broader perspectives and increase business literacy.
- Mentoring develops a network of colleagues with established, supportive relationships. These relationships are not just between the mentors and mentees, but also between the mentors themselves who develop stronger relationships as colleagues by participating in the program together. In a sense, the mentors form a different kind of cohort group.
- Mentoring creates organizational loyalty. Employees recognize the value of the District's commitment of resources to the development academies, particularly when so many other areas of the organization are experiencing cut backs.

Lessons Learned

The following are the most important lessons we have learned:

- Ensure senior leadership commitment. Successful mentoring programs link mentoring to existing organizational priorities. Our workforce development

programs are part of a strategy to meet one of the goals in the District's Strategic Plan "to ensure ample talent to do the District's work today and tomorrow."

- Clarify ground rules, roles and responsibilities. Establishing clear expectations is essential for recruiting volunteers. People want to know what they're getting into! It also sets a firm foundation and framework for the development of the mentoring relationship.
- Provide high quality formal training. Both the mentees and the mentors need training on how to make the best use of the mentoring relationships.
- Support mentors throughout. In taking on a new role mentors need to feel that they will be supported if challenges arise. Promote mutual support by regularly bringing mentors together to share knowledge and experience.
- Allow flexibility. Where possible, be willing to make changes along the way to improve the program.
- Define success broadly. Focus on learning and continuous improvement rather than trying to achieve perfection. Approach "mistakes" as learning opportunities. Start with a pilot program and be transparent about how revisions made are a result of input and learning from experience.
- Expect variations in level of engagement. Recognize that some mentoring relationships will have greater "resonance" than others, while setting minimum standards.
- Mentoring provides a growth opportunity for the mentors as well as the mentees. Mentors will develop new skills and greater organizational knowledge. They will improve their coaching skills, which will translate into improved ability to provide support to their own employees.

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