

WORKPLACE MENTOR CASE STUDY

Grow through mentoring

ACCA

A member of ACCA since 1989, Shekhar Bhalla works as a divisional financial controller at Morguard, a Canadian investment management and real estate company. He's also an active member of his local branch of the Lions Club, an international network of over a million individuals who put their professional skills to good use volunteering for community projects, helping the disabled, youths and disadvantaged people, as well as environmental projects and emergency response initiatives.

'I enjoy my work with the Lions – our activities centre mostly on raising funds for various local projects, such as cancer research,' he says. 'But when the opportunity came up to be involved in mentoring, I liked the prospect of doing one-on-one work – doing something that would ultimately help someone in their career; that was my motivation.'

'I also enjoy passing on knowledge; it's rewarding to help other people learn; I've been in the workplace for a long time, so of course, I've picked up a few pointers that can always be of use to others with less experience.'

There was also the fact that he'd be working with someone from a different culture: 'I'm always looking for opportunities to further my own growth; by meeting and getting to know people from other parts of the world, you broaden to your own outlook.'

Through an agency that focused on employability of immigrants into Canada, Bhalla was allocated a mentee, Leyla. She wanted to find a job in accounting, which was what she had been doing in Iran before coming to Canada. She'd been hired as a receptionist, unable to find a job in her own field.

'My mission was to be as positive as possible and ensure that she was correctly focused in her search for the job she wanted,' says Bhalla. 'At the same time, I had to demonstrate the need to be flexible; you don't always get what you look for first time round. There are always ups and downs along the way.'

'So when I took the job on, we looked at her situation together. An immediate priority was to completely re-vamp her résumé, so that it was more appropriate for the Canadian market, and would compare well with other candidates. On a more long-term basis, we decided to set a target of finding an accounting job within six months, over which time we would meet regularly.'

Bhalla and Leyla initially met up each week for about an hour; Bhalla delivering feedback on Leyla's jobhunting activity and applications, as well as conducting mock interviews.

'I encouraged her to register with accounting recruitment agencies, as well as taking some extra courses that would enhance her résumé,' he says. 'We corresponded by email virtually every day – but that was a good sign, as it meant she was being active and applying herself to the search, and not becoming despondent. We eventually progressed to meeting every two weeks, although often for a longer session, especially if an interview hadn't gone too well and she needed support to inject extra impetus back into her efforts.'

DIGGING DEEP

But not every mentee – particularly within volunteering initiatives, where the parties have had no previous relationship nor work for the same employer – is willing to open up to their mentor.

Bhalla says that in instances where there are issues lying beneath the surface that are getting in the way of making progress, it's important not to ignore them.

'I'd previously had a mentee who clearly had personal problems; every time we sat down to work on improving his employability, I could tell that he wasn't focusing on the issue at hand. He was always pre-occupied. I knew that I'd have to get to the heart of the matter; otherwise we just wouldn't get anywhere. By gently probing, I was able to get him to open up about various issues at home that he was understandably reluctant to discuss – but which were having a knock-on effect on his job search. I was able to put him in touch with the right people and resources to sort those problems out. It took two or three meetings to get him to open up – but after that, we could then make real progress.'

CASE STUDY

DEDICATING TIME – A TWO-WAY COMMITMENT

Most mentors would agree that, while you can't let mentoring take over your work or your home life, it's inevitable that the mentor will end up giving up more of their time to the relationship than originally planned. For many, if their mentee is fully engaged and open to their suggestions as to how to achieve their goals, the additional time isn't resented or regarded as an irksome duty.

But it's important to strike a balance.

'With Leyla, we established some parameters at the beginning,' says Bhalla. 'We'd say we'd meet or speak on the phone on a certain day at a certain time – and I'd ensure that I would be available. Luckily, she was a very committed and determined mentee. She understood how busy my schedule was, so she always called on time, and perhaps we'd talk for half an hour or 40 minutes.

'We'd follow up on email, which didn't interfere with my work; I could always respond in evenings. But it's important to set those parameters and gain that commitment at the beginning for the relationship to work.'

OVERCOMING HURDLES

No matter how inspiring or capable the mentor, though, it's the mentees who have primary responsibility for themselves. It's they who have to leave the mentoring session, retain and act on the advice they've been given and then deal with the consequences or make decisions on their own, before reporting back at the next appointment.

That means there will be occasions when the mentor's key focus is to provide a shoulder to cry on when things go wrong – but more importantly, to get the mentee back on their feet and focused on future successes, not past failures.

'A couple of times, Leyla didn't get jobs she'd been interviewed for – jobs that she'd been pretty sure about – nor was she given reasons,' says Bhalla. 'I had to think of ways to bring her mood and attitude right back up again, so that she wouldn't take the rejections personally. She admitted she may have been over-confident after the first one, so we analysed all the reasons so that she'd learn from that setback. After the second one, she became nervous, so we did some more role-plays, all focused on the areas we identified for improvement.'

After four interviews, Leyla landed a job that she's happy in – and Bhalla was the first person she called – he recalls: 'I was so proud of her; she even called me before her parents. As a mentor, what more could you ask for?'