

fundamentals

MANAGING THE LEARNING FUNCTION

Mentoring is a direct method for developing your L&D team members.



Bring a Novice Instructional Designer Up to Speed

BY IRENE STERN FRIELICH

If you manage an L&D team, you've probably hired instructional designers. Sometimes they come with advanced degrees and many years of relevant experience. And others, they bring content expertise (in your organization's quality, technology, or safety functions, for example) but little or no experience with creating effective learning solutions.

It can make a lot of sense to hire a subject matter expert to develop training programs related to her field. She will have all the content knowledge and experience to pass along to others, and she will be enthusiastic about sharing it—it's her work, and she finds it meaningful. So why shouldn't she share everything she knows about the subject?

Identifying Your Team Member's Ideal Mentor

What if you just hired a new team member, someone with little or no instructional design experience, and plan to develop her with a mentorship? How can you uncover what she needs from the engagement? Here are a few steps.

1. Define the pain points where you anticipate your new instructional designer will hit a tough spot in her new assignment. Talk to her, find out what she feels she needs help with most, and agree on how a mentor could help.
2. Together with your newly hired instructional designer, list some attributes of a person who may help her. For example, she may need an expert in writing learning objectives, managing successful projects, or working effectively with subject matter experts. Also, ask her to consider the personality attributes of her ideal mentor, such as being direct or having a sense of humor.
3. List two to three people in your network who have those attributes and who specialize in something you're seeking from the mentor.
4. Formulate your request. What is your goal for your new instructional designer? Why would this individual be a good mentor? How will you invite him into the conversation with you?

For an answer, look at the courses designed by experts with little instructional design (ID) experience. Many are too long or include too much content that isn't directly pertinent, and some of the content may be difficult to recall.

Another option is to hire a novice learning professional into an ID position. Perhaps the initial plan is to have him manage existing programs, maybe make some content updates. But then you assign him responsibility for developing a course from scratch, hoping his lack of experience with learning science and current best practices won't be an issue.

I have encountered these situations many times in my 20-plus years working with organizations. Talent development managers struggle with educating their new instructional designers. Yet, a manager often doesn't have the time to teach the instructional designer herself.

As instructional designers acclimate to their new roles, you may send them to broad-based training classes—but is there another, more focused way to get a

new instructional designer up to speed? Yes: mentoring. You can engage an experienced, trusted instructional designer who will work one-on-one with the individual to address specific learning gaps and help her develop self-reliance.

What does ID mentoring look like?

Let's use an example to illustrate what quality ID mentoring looks like and how you may use it to develop a team member.

My client, a new instructional designer whom we'll call Alex, had worked as an admin in his company's learning and organizational development group. Alex was promoted to instructional designer and started out updating existing courses. Then he needed to create a course from the ground up. However, his manager, stretched thin, didn't have the necessary time to support Alex's development and had no other instructional designers in the department to help. That's why she engaged me to help him.

Our goal was to help Alex design the course and learn enough from the experience to work more independently in the future.

At our initial meeting, Alex and I identified the primary goal of the mentoring engagement: to develop and launch a course on good documentation practices. Next, we discussed the business need for this course (the problems it should solve) before considering the foundational skills Alex would need to succeed. Since he was developing a brand-new course, the list included:

- conducting needs assessments
- building successful partnerships with subject matter experts
- writing learning objectives
- determining the evaluation strategy
- identifying learning modalities
- incorporating techniques to engage learners and create effective learning.

At the end of our first discussion, we planned a series of meetings, about twice a month for at least six months.

In the follow-up meetings, which lasted two to three hours each, we focused on one skill at a time. I would share some (but not too much) of the theory associated with a skill, a method or approach for applying it, and the importance of using the method or approach. For example, when we covered writing learning objectives, we studied Robert Mager's approach (outlined in *Preparing Instructional Objectives: A Critical Tool in the Development of Effective Instruction*), and Bloom's Taxonomy. We discussed the ways those methods could help Alex and where he may find them challenging to use. Then, we created a couple of learning objectives for his course and analyzed how each one aligned with the two systems.

Next, I assigned Alex to write the rest of the learning objectives for his course. Before our next meeting, I asked Alex to send me the learning objectives he created, along with any questions about places where he struggled. I responded to the questions with guidance and encouraged him to continue working.

Start the Search for the Ideal Mentor

If you're having a hard time finding the right person in your network to mentor a new instructional designer, consider looking in these places:

- **Your own department or organization.** Is there someone with bona fide instructional design expertise in your department or organization who may be willing to develop the target mentee? Does he have the proven skills and personal qualities your mentee needs? This may be a great career opportunity for him and a budget saver for you.
- **Professional associations.** If you participate in your local ATD chapter or another nearby professional association, you can meet a lot of potential mentors. Or maybe the people you connect with through these organizations will be able to recommend others as mentors. Share what you are looking for in a mentor with these connections and see if they have any suggestions. It can't hurt to ask.
- **Thought leaders.** You read books, articles, and blog posts. You listen to podcasts and speakers. Even if you don't know them personally, take the chance to network. Reach out, share what you're looking for, and see if they have any suggestions. Again, it can't hurt to ask.

You can develop a timeline to fit the mentee's schedule. For example, if a mentee needs to be away from work, she won't miss a class and you don't need to worry about what she didn't get to learn. Instead, you have the flexibility to create a schedule around the learner's calendar or make last-minute changes when necessary. This way, if your priorities shift for an important new initiative, you can adjust the program's length accordingly and refocus on the new work at hand.

Your involvement promotes accountability. As the learner's manager, you should attend the initial meeting between the learner and mentor and then consider joining periodically. That sends a message that you take the program seriously. Also, if you request regular updates about the learner's progress, you can monitor and support it. This also lets you share your input and shape the mentorship to fit your team's goals.

The individualized action learning approach focuses on the mentee's specific needs. Studying a topic, immediately applying it to a real project, and then receiving targeted feedback and assistance enable a new instructional designer to fill specific competency gaps. Further, if a learner's needs change throughout the mentorship, you can adjust the content accordingly.

Going back to our example, what is Alex up to now, a few months after completing his mentorship? He has successfully launched the course he was working on, and it has earned a positive reception from the business unit it supports. Meanwhile, he and his manager also feel that his skill set and professional potential have improved. As a result, Alex's manager has assigned him more courses to develop, which so far have launched according to plan.

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The next time we met, we reviewed his final learning objectives, made tweaks, and revisited Mager and Bloom. Then we moved onto the next skill and repeated the process. Some topics took two or more meetings and others we incorporated into meetings throughout the engagement. For example, brain science came up frequently as we developed the course outline and the course materials.

After every one or two meetings, I updated Alex's manager with highlights from what we covered and a list of Alex's next steps. When appropriate, I also suggested ways the manager could provide support.

Why choose mentoring over ID classes?

Although a six-month mentorship can help a new instructional designer, it isn't the same as five years of experience or completing a graduate-level ID degree. So, why use this approach instead of classes? There are three compelling reasons.



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