

Matt Reeves __ Wendy Axelrod Expert Interview

Matt Reeves: Welcome. Dr. Wendy Axelrod is an executive coach, former HR executive, author, speaker, and renowned mentorship guru because of her leadership championing a mentoring program for HR professionals in Philadelphia since 2002. She holds a doctorate in organizational psychology, has written two books with her latest being 10 Steps to Successful Mentoring, and has taken time out of her busy schedule today to discuss what separates successful mentoring programs from those that flop. Thank you for taking the time, Dr. Axelrod.

Wendy Axelrod: My pleasure. Thank you.

Matt Reeves: Well, let's jump into it, but to help set the stage and learn a little bit more about yourself and your background, Wendy, can you share with us how you have developed your career and what led you to becoming interested in studying mentorship?

Wendy Axelrod: Sure. Speaking about mentorship is one of my favorite things. In college I wanted to explore psychology, and by my junior year, I realized I didn't like the idea of hearing people's problems and what they wanted to solve for their life. What I wanted to do was work with people when they were at their positive best. I really wanted to be in the playing field of psychology at work. And that turned into be organizational psychology and organization development. My career started with that education, and I did a lot of work in the area of developing organizations, developing leaders, talent development, so all things development.

I really didn't land on a deep focus in mentorship until I became president of an area professional association. I looked at the fact that the members were very homogeneous; we were not attracting enough of the juniors. And so I created a program to bring in the juniors and to ensure a great talent pipeline of professionals in human resources and organization development. That program was a mentoring early careerists in our field; and, that's now in its 21st year.

Matt Reeves: Wow, that's amazing longevity. Well, the topic for today's discussion is what separates successful mentoring programs from those that flop. The fact that this program has lasts for 20 years, there must be some insight into what made it successful. I'd love to hear a little bit more about how the program got started, what challenges you ran into, and how it's lasted for 20 years now.

Wendy Axelrod: We had a lot of challenges in the beginning, people didn't really understand what goes into mentoring and thought it was mostly about connecting a senior person with a junior person, get them going, give them some initial kickoff training and let them go at it. Then talk to them maybe midway through or at the end. And what we found out in terms of challenges is that it was tough for a number of these pairs to really stay connected and to get meaningful outcomes out of it, both for the mentee and the mentor. The mentors weren't satisfied. I had mentor said, "this is the last time, Wendy, I'm going to do this. It didn't work out. My mentee wasn't good enough and it was not a good use of my time". I then knew we need to do things differently. Do you want to hear what we did that we ended up doing things differently?

Matt Reeves: Absolutely. Yeah. Please go into it.

Wendy Axelrod: We recognized that there was a need to screen both mentors and mentees, that it can't just be a very informal "get to know each other". People needed to understand what was required in the program so that they would get the most out of it. We wanted to see our mentors come back to us again and again. And that one woman who was a senior exec said never again for her. So, we wanted to ensure it would be a good experience for everyone else going forward. We also created a goal that we wanted a hundred percent of the pairs started to be the pairs that ended and in a community based volunteer mentoring program, that is a very high bar. So, we did that, you know, we put in a fair amount of structure. We said it needs to be goals driven, and then we realized we needed to give a lot of support ongoing, not just have the pairs go off on their own, but make meaningful things happen for them that support them beyond their one-on-one conversations.

Matt Reeves: That makes ton of sense. You wrote an article, make your Mentoring Program Memorable, where I think you mentioned some of these, you had five points that you put really well, first was Guard the Gate, which I think you just mentioned, sort of screening the mentors and mentees. Second was give it a backbone. Anything to add to that point?

Wendy Axelrod: The "backbone" part is really about the structure, about people knowing that they are coming into a program, it's going to be nine months, we're going to meet regularly. There are some requirements for you to stay in the program. So, that actually goes into some of the screening. We tell them, this is what is in the program, do you agree to this? And we don't want them to feel surprised, that things were not really laid out for them. We want them to understand, we're going to be checking on their goals and there are rules and boundaries. For example, in the beginning, mentors thought it was great to go talk to the person's supervisor. Well, not really a good idea because you're building this trusting relationship, and as soon as you speak with the person's manager, supervisor, you've blown that trust out of the water. So

that's all part of the backbone is having that structure and creating the expectations around that.

Matt Reeves: That all makes a ton of sense to me. Point three here around raising intriguing eyebrows is when a question I get all the time from people I talk to who are trying to launch programs within companies. They're always concerned that they won't have enough mentors. I'm curious what you think are some of the best ways to promote a mentoring program?

Wendy Axelrod: Yes, you need to find both Mentors and good qualified mentees. I think that the good stories that people tell as a result, what they are getting from it, is meaningful to others. For mentors, I think it's really important to highlight what they get from it. There is a lot of growth that goes on for mentors. They sharpen their coaching skills, they get to practice outside of their work environment, where it's more relaxed and they can begin to see what works in developing another and what doesn't. And then just ensuring that everything in the program is in place, so that at the end of this, good stories, great reputation, the uniqueness. People talk about it being a 21 year old mentoring program. We have some mentors who've been there all along, by the way. They talk about how distinctive this is because it is a quality program that is well managed where they feel well supported, where there's a lot of innovation, where they're learning new things all the time. And by the way, I think you know, and maybe your listeners know, that it's really work at becoming for a mentor and learning all the pieces, their career advances as well. Studies done internally in corporations have shown that. And also when we have surveyed our own mentors, we ask "have you learned some new things that you apply in your day job?" 90% say YES.

Matt Reeves: Well, the fact that you have so many positive references to market your program must tie into effect. Which point four you have here around cultivating your mentors, which is also something we were chatting about before we started this podcast. I think you think is one of the key parts, the most important part of a mentoring program. Can you speak a little bit more about what that means to cultivate your mentors?

Wendy Axelrod: Yes, thank you. I do think, that's where the energy needs to go. I think of all the pieces of the program: setting up the platform, matching, giving the training, all of that is a given to be excellent for a high caliber mentoring program. BUT, supporting your mentors, it's really about creating the right expectation before they come in, having them think through what it is they hope to get from the mentoring experience, setting goals for themselves in their own development, trying new things, make it a stretch, fun, engaging experience. One of the favorite things that I love participating in with company clients is the mentor monthly meeting. And that is a cohort of mentors coming together in a safe space to talk about what's going on for them in their mentoring. They're not coming in, asking a question about here's what my mentee is going

through, how would you solve that? Instead, we want mentors to share, here's what *I'm* going through. What coaching do you have for me? It's feeling stale. I feel like I'm not getting my points across. My mentee won't listen to me. And of course, when somebody raises "my mentee won't listen to me". that garners a lot of coaching right there, because mentees shouldn't be "listening to your stories and taking your lead". So that opens up a whole area that that mentor then can then learn from. So that mentor monthly meeting is really great.

The ongoing resources for them and what I call the safety net, which is a check-in for every person that is in the program, how is it going? Are your goals set? Are you making progress and not just as a pair, but as individuals. In case there are some issues, how can we now help you to get past those and to resolve those? So that safety net really is a great support. I'm no longer running the program; I am the mentor coach within the program. At the end of each cycle, we always evaluate and often what the mentors say was the favorite part was, (though they love working with their mentees), that cohort monthly meeting. There they can really talk meaningfully about how they are increasing their capabilities as mentors.

Matt Reeves: That's all tremendous advice. That being said, I can imagine this can seem a bit daunting to a new administrator. And I'm curious, what do you think are the first steps that a HR professional needs to keep in mind to get started?

Wendy Axelrod: First of all, there's lots of guidance out there. So, as daunting as this is, there's a lot of guidance on what is successful. We're getting better and better at it, and I think we're establishing best practices that are accessible to everyone.

I think you can't go it alone. You can start the program by having a conversation with one other person, but don't go it alone. Know what the purpose is and then build the program to that purpose. Think about the purpose of a particular mentoring program to be linked to some sort of strategy, whether it is a talent development strategy, a diversity, an inclusion strategy, a succession management process, whatever it is. And when you've determined where that need is and what, how you want to support it, make sure you have great support from the organization and people willing to talk it up, to participate, to be a speaker. A senior executive, can be a speaker in it. Really, it takes a village. Don't do it alone and put the right village together. And then know the core pieces to the program. You need all the elements of how you invite people in, how you select and match, how they get trained, how they get supported throughout. All of those things are there. But make sure it is in a position to be well valued by the organization.

The biggest problem is people think it's free and it's informal, and those are the programs that don't last long. When people think "let's do a mentoring program, it'll be free, won't cost/not a big budget item; it can be informal; we really don't have to do much; just bring those mentors in and they'll take care of things". That's a big misstep.

Matt Reeves: Absolutely. I certainly think one of the most important parts, and you mentioned this in our dialogue before as we were setting this call up around, I can't remember exactly the term you used, but we would call it like a program sponsor, someone who's senior in the organization. You're giving the back, this both in terms of supporting it from a marketing standpoint and letting people know that's a valued initiative, but also providing it the resources it needs to succeed. Be that the time of an administrator or additional resources like a mentor coach or software to help support them.

Wendy Axelrod: Absolutely. I think you hit the nail on the head and this whole idea of it takes a village is bring in leaders from various functions. You have that top sponsor, but let's have other leaders act as mentors, as resource providers. Get people in on the action, let it be visible. Report out at the end of it, what was gained. You know, I'll often ask a program manager, did you reach success? Did you reach the goals of what you hoped the program would do? And they'll say to me, well, we graduated 25 people. I respond, what was your goal? Did you have a goal around promotion, around increasing capabilities, ... a whole variety of things. Measure that, not just that people got through it, that could just be a check the box. We want it to have meaningful results.

Matt Reeves: You mentioned a couple of goals we hear with our customers is, goals like the number of people getting promoted, a good goal, what do you think are some examples of good goals that organizations should think about?

Wendy Axelrod: Absolutely. And again, it goes back to what is the strategic initiative. You are bridging this too. If you are looking to move people along in capabilities, it's a general program. Perhaps, you want to move you through leadership. Have benchmarks for what you're looking for. The mentees being promoted could be right or they could be irrelevant depending on what the goal is. So, here's an example, if the goal is around succession. In one company I worked with, the senior most leaders mentor the next level down to get them ready to take on different kinds of roles as the company was expanding. They went back and tracked over the course of years- are we in a better position now? Having gone through year one, year two, year three of this cycle, they determined they were—the leadership team was greatly strengthened in the areas they targeted. So, the measures will depend on what you would like your goals to be, but please don't say 25 people graduated. That's very nice, but it's not concrete enough. It's not specific enough to show the financial return, the benefit to the business, and the benefit to the individuals.

Matt Reeves: Absolutely. Well, we're coming up on time here, but I think we have time for one more question. We've talked a lot about what makes a program successful. Curious if there's

anything you want to highlight on the flip side, any kind of mistakes or things that people should avoid doing?

Wendy Axelrod: I'm just going to underscore a couple things that I've talked about before. Assuming that it can be informal, assuming that the mentor knows what to do once they're paired up. I think those are mistakes. I think spinning it out on its own in the universe with, not great check-ins, that could be a misstep. And not checking in to see if things are languishing, if things have gotten out of hand, or, if mentors perhaps have broken boundaries. Just do those regular check-ins to hear how it's going, what is going on. and being mindful of those kinds of pieces will keep you on track.

Matt Reeves: Well, Wendy, this has been a great conversation. Thank you for taking the time to share your wealth and experience with us. The conversation will undoubtedly be helpful for our audience. Where can people go to learn more about you, your work, and potentially connect?

Wendy Axelrod: Thank you. So, they can learn more about me at wendyaxelrodphd.com. And there it will talk about my mentoring practice and also my coaching practice and actually, some personal things about me as well. So, that's the best place. And if they want to get me directly with an email, is wendy@wendyaxelrodphd.com.

Matt Reeves: Perfect. Well, thanks again for your time. Really appreciate it.

Wendy Axelrod: Really appreciate it myself. Thank you.

Matt Reeves: All right.

Wendy Axelrod: Take care. Bye now.