

Q¹²® ELEMENT: Q06

There is someone at work who encourages my development.

In this case, “development” does not mean “promotion.” It does not mean each team member gets what he or she wants. It means helping individuals find roles or positions that fit their unique combination of skills, knowledge, and talents.

Development requires commitment — from both the manager and the employee. Each employee in the workplace is a unique individual. Each person may need, respond to, or value developmental encouragement differently. Encouraged development starts with an understanding, followed by a commitment.

It is difficult to get traction on any of the other elements without the Sixth. Consider the fairly large group — on average, six in 10 — who cannot strongly agree that neither their manager nor anyone else is looking out for their development. Less than 1 percent of those who have no mentor are able to achieve real engagement with their employer through the strength of the other 11 elements. Conversely, nearly nine out of 10 employees who report having someone at work who encourages their development are classified as “engaged,” while one in 10 are “not engaged” and less than one percent are “actively disengaged.” These statistics indicate that regardless of whether a company’s Web site or personnel department promises it, having a mentor is fundamental, part of the unwritten social contract workers anticipate when they are hired.

Unfortunately, in their eagerness to force the issue universally, many companies create formal “mentoring” programs that try to assign the two people to each other or impose connections that, to be effective, must form naturally. As one Internet commentator complained, “What has been historically an informal, unofficial, voluntary, mutually agreeable, and self-selected interaction between two people has become a program — an institutionalized stratagem for trying to force what probably can only come about naturally — and a staple, if not a commodity, in the bag of tricks toted from client to client by many a consultant.”

A worker’s manager is usually first in line to fulfill this role, but she is not alone. Doctors are often managed by administrators who are not physicians, but look for advice to the chief of surgery or to an approachable, more experienced doctor. Junior reporters may have their writing honed by editors, but they learn

how to track down stories by following more senior reporters. Musicians follow the conductor, but they learn a substantial amount from those who play the same instrument.

Business writer Don Cohen once noticed that a few of the familiar brown United Parcel Service delivery trucks were always parked around 2 p.m. near a park in Massachusetts he often passed. The drivers sat on the nearby benches eating their lunch and talking. Curious, Cohen finally stopped one day to ask if this was just a way to avoid eating alone.

“Yes, they got together to have some company at lunch, but ‘We talk about everything and anything,’ including a lot about work,” wrote Cohen. “Drivers who had worked in town longest could tell newer drivers how to find unmarked streets and addresses and when particular customers were likely to be available to sign for a delivery.

The veterans shared other special knowledge too: which customers wanted packages left in the garage or around the side of a house; when school let out and there were kids to watch for on the street and buses slowing traffic.” The drivers also told the author that they frequently exchanged packages to even out the workload, to help someone get home early or to correct a mistake at the sorting center. Such gatherings may seem a small thing, but given that much of exceptional performance is in the details, and the importance of emulation to human learning, they can be some of the most important venues for creating a results-driven culture.

This summary is a revised excerpt on this Q¹² element from *12: The Elements of Great Managing*.