

Making the master-apprentice model work for you

Margaret Beaton 23 September 2011

There's a proven and centuries-old way of building intellectual capital in organisations. It is one of the most efficient ways for staff to cultivate their learning capacity and remain engaged and motivated.

It's the Master-Apprentice model. The theory is simple: as a master, you develop others, and as an apprentice, you learn from your supervisors and mentors.

So what makes the master-apprentice relationship one that really works?

It can work so well because roles are delineated. People in these roles tend to want to play them, rather than feel they have to. A high-functioning master-apprentice relationship is about working together on-the-job, reflecting experience back into the conversations in a structured way, welcoming the interdependence, recognising the mutual benefit and the shared accountability. It's a two-way street.

But what happens when it's time to move on?

This is that fragile territory encapsulated in the title of my blog 'Letting go. Stepping up.' (see my previous [post](#)). Both masters and apprentices need to be cognisant of what happens at transition points; when it's time to move on. Michelle Golden has a great [article](#) on what can go wrong in the master-apprentice relationship, on her blog, [Golden Practices](#).

The reality is all leaders are both a master and an apprentice at one time or another – an understanding of the life cycle of this kind of relationship is essential to successful use of it.

Tips for making the most of the master-apprentice model:

1. Become aware of the master and apprentice roles or opportunities in your work life.
2. Understand your leadership style (or your capacity to be an apprentice)
3. Work on altering your personal style, if necessary, and applying it to the relationships you've identified as having potential. It's usually about attitude and communication.
4. Look to the future. It may be working now, but you need to plan for the next transition.

The master-apprentice model is a tried and trusted tool for organisations, and one not to be taken for granted. Try looking at your role in these relationships in this fresh light. It's energising. And intrinsically satisfying.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a master? Or as an apprentice?

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