How Do We Cultivate Our Skills and Talents?

Session Objectives

- To define mentoring and the qualities of an effective mentoring program.

- To demonstrate the value of individuals or institutions sharing experience and information.

- To illustrate how the sharing of experience and information is vital for capacity building and sustainability in a learning organization.

Before You Start: Ask the group to begin thinking about how it would like to mark the conclusion of the workshop. It is important to plan ahead so that participants leave the workshop feeling that their needs and expectations have been addressed. The "Communicating in a Workshop Setting" section of the handbook addresses this topic further.

Suggestions for Facilitation

Read aloud the following story of an organization in Nigeria—BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights—whose programs and internal practices are all geared to cultivating the skills and talents of its staff and constituency through effective mentoring and training. Discuss among the group the criteria for a learning organization and which characteristics of BAOBAB fit these criteria. The questions and the exercise that follow may help guide the group discussion.

Facilitators have found it most successful when this discussion is conducted with the whole group, allowing participants to benefit from everyone's observations and ideas (see Appendix B for further suggestions).
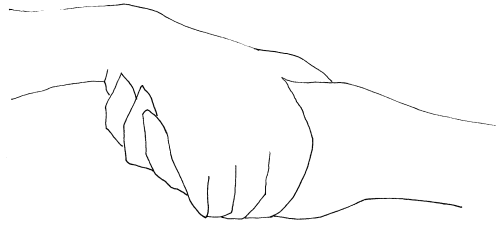
A Circle of Learning: Mentoring Women in Nigeria

Bringing people into the circle of learning and then expanding that circle—mentoring is a process that is essential to building an organization's capacity and ensuring its sustainability. The organization that Ayesha Imam and others founded, BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, aims to improve the knowledge, exercise, and development of women's human rights under Nigeria's customary, religious, and secular laws. The organization's name is also that of a tree found throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The baobab tree is able to endure adverse climates, providing nourishment and medication for humans as well as shelter for small animals. BAOBAB seeks to emulate the qualities of this tree—strength and perseverance—by reaching out to women and empowering them with skills they may use in their daily lives and in assisting others. As such the organization enables and inspires women who participate in its programs to think and act independently.

BAOBAB supports and asserts women's human rights through a variety of activities—most notably conscientization, training, publishing, and networking. At the core of these activities is the use of technology. The organization's founders consider technology neither good nor bad in and of itself. Rather, the issues are who controls technology, how it is harnessed, and what effects result from its usage. For instance, BAOBAB relies on copy machines to publish and disseminate information for women who would otherwise not have access; on computers to educate women in tasks such as typing and bookkeeping; and on email and Internet to contact and collaborate with like-minded groups. This mobilization of technological resources also serves to develop sub-Saharan Africa's communications infrastructure.

BAOBAB's approach toward educating around women's human rights is interactive, experiential, and practical. Trainers know that their trainees come to new responsibilities and rights with a reservoir of past experiences and draw on this reservoir, encouraging women to recount and share their experiences in order that trainees and trainers alike learn new perspectives and skills. Most significantly, BAOBAB trains women in skills that are important to their professional and/or personal lives. While providing training in the use of computer software, for instance, BAOBAB teaches its own staff and volunteers how to work with spreadsheet software in order to balance their accounts or word processing to write their own reports and histories.

The organization's motto is: "You cannot change the past, but you can try to change the future!" Changing, indeed bettering, the future entails recognizing that one's attitude and efforts can affect many others and vice versa. BAOBAB's Email Solidarity Campaign Training and its Women and Law Programme illustrate the long-term benefits of cultivating the abilities, talents, and self-confidence of others. The Email Solidarity Campaign Training was begun in 1998-99 with approximately fifty women attending workshops on email and internet usage in order to strengthen solidarity campaigns for women's rights, and improve communications and support amongst and between English and French speaking human rights advocates throughout Africa. These women are in touch and continue to share information and strategies. With their new or improved skills, women are now engaging in dialogue about their rights more effectively on a regional and international level. The Women and Law Programme similarly brought small groups of women and a few men together to research practices and explore women's understandings and experiences of Muslim, customary, and secular laws. The women, who initially deferred to men as authorities, gradually grew more assured in their understanding of the Shari´a and other forms of law. One participant will be the first woman to obtain a doctorate in Islamic law from a Nigerian university. She will in turn educate others and also serve as a role model for other women seeking to surpass traditional barriers and renegotiate their positions in society.[22]

Questions for Discussion

- What is BAOBAB's principal aim?

- How would you characterize BAOBAB's approach to mentoring? What are the short- and long-term advantages of this approach? Can you see any disadvantages?

- What other elements would you add to a mentoring program?

- What are the characteristics of a good mentor? Can a mentor also be a mentee?

- What role does technology play in BAOBAB's efforts to develop women's abilities and assets?

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[22] Based on materials sent by and a telephone interview with Ayesha Imam on January 10, 2001 by the Women's Learning Partnership.

- What is the value, for example, of teaching BAOBAB's staff and volunteers to work with Excel spreadsheets? How does this approach towards computer software training benefit the individuals involved? How does it help BAOBAB? How does it serve the community?

- How would you define the process of mentoring?

- Have you ever benefitted from mentoring? Can you think of an instance in which mentoring could have helped you?

- Have you ever served as a mentor? Describe some mentoring strategies you have used or would like to use in your personal and/or professional life. What were the benefits of serving as a mentor?

- How can mentoring be used by women to help other women?

Exercise: Developing a Local Mentoring Program

Allow approximately one hour and 15 minutes for this exercise.

A mentoring program can be an independent, free-standing project in the community, such as an after-school program in which young students meet with older students for advice and tutoring. Or, it can be attached to another larger organization, such as a program affiliated with an obstetrics ward at a hospital that arranges for new mothers to meet with more experienced mothers for advice and counseling. In this exercise, teams will develop a mentoring program of their own design that fits into either of the categories above—an independent or affiliated project.

1. Have the group break into teams of three to five participants. At least one team member will need to take notes, and the same person or another volunteer will report the team's discussion back to the group. For approximately 20-30 minutes, each team should consider the following:

    - Who will be the target constituency—the mentees your program will be designed to help? Some examples include young girls attending a local school who want to be leaders one day, housewives wishing to begin their own home businesses, or women who have been newly elected to office. Teams may use any of the examples provided or come up with their own target constituency based on a need for mentoring and guidance they see in their community.

    - What sort of people would be the best equipped to mentor the chosen constituency? Are there individuals with specific personal experiences, professional backgrounds, or other qualities that would be particularly valuable mentors for the target constituency?

- How would the mentors work with the mentees? Would they have weekly meetings, conduct training programs, participate informally in certain activities together? How long would they meet? How often?

- Would the mentees or the mentors in the program ever be brought together as a group to meet their peers for support and advice? What would take place at such a meeting?

- Consider the needs of the mentees and how the program could best meet those needs. Likewise, you should consider the needs of the mentors and how the program could be set up to be fulfilling and rewarding for them as well.

2. When the teams reconvene in a group, one person from each will describe her team's mentoring program. Workshop participants may ask questions or offer comments and suggestions about the different mentoring programs.

Observations

- What did you like and/or dislike about this exercise?

- Did you find it difficult to evaluate or critique the other teams' mentoring programs? Why or why not?

- Did the exercise help you imagine new and innovative ways of introducing mentoring in your community? If so, what were they?

We need to bring the potential for the use of the Internet

to all of the peoples of the world and that includes not only

the hardware and training in the use of machines,

but also culture-relative, language relevant,

and community created materials.

"The Building Blocks of Leadership"