Research across a variety of disciplines looking at a variety of industries all come to the same conclusion about mentoring—it leads to better employee retention rates and happier employees who feel more valued. In the retail and service industries, mentorship often leads to improved customer service because mature, fully engaged employees know the value of delivering top-line customer service.

This Retailer’s Guide aims to get retailers thinking about mentorship and how they might design and implement mentoring activities or a full-scale mentorship program.

The difference between coaching and mentoring

Baseball coaches get their hands dirty. If the player standing at home plate can’t get the swing right, the coach picks up a bat and shows how it’s done.

On the store floor, retail managers coach associates on every aspect of the business: how to run the cash, how to engage customers, how to stock the shelf, and so on. Coaching is foundational to retail management. Mentoring—that’s something else.

The difference between coaching and mentoring is a difference in goals, says Cy Charney, president of Charney & Associates, a consultancy specializing in employee development.

“Coaching aims to give employees technical skills. The goal is immediate and hands-on. Mentoring has a farther horizon. Mentoring focuses on career development. The goal is to help a person develop the skills of mature, reasoning, responsible leaders.”

Five pressure points that can undo a mentoring program

Mentoring is about human relationships. By definition, it is fraught with human problems. Here are five pressure points that retailers should consider when thinking about how to implement mentoring programs.

1. Support: Senior leadership must support the program.

   Like any successful human resources program, senior leaders and store owners must champion mentorship because they are the only ones who can make it happen. Senior managers need to pick their successors, show protégés where the com-
pany will go and bring the protégés along.
Indeed, for a mentoring program to work, mentoring needs to become part of the senior manager’s job description. Mentoring isn’t a program managers can view from a distance—it’s a program that exists only when managers make it happen.

2. Potential: Retailers need to identify high potential protégés.

Everybody needs coaching. Not everybody needs mentoring.
As a general principle, retailers should reserve mentoring for high potential people. They should treat mentoring as a way of grooming protégés for leadership.

How do retailers know the high potential people? That’s the challenge. Part of the design of a mentorship program has to include a mechanism to evaluate talent and identify the high performers, the people the company wants to retain, and the people with the potential for leadership.

Dave DeFilippo, a researcher of mentorship practices, says businesses should “make being selected an honour.” Retailers should set the bar high and employees chosen for mentoring need to know they are part of a select group.

Mentoring is not counselling. It provides motivation and support to an individual seeking a new path. The mentor can influence the mentee in many ways: by helping to set performance standards, challenging self-expectations, offering motivation during difficult times or just by being a sounding board.

3. Leadership: Retailers have to find the right mentors.

What does a good mentor look like? Charney says mentors should satisfy three needs. First, the mentor should not be the protégé’s direct boss. The direct boss is the protégé’s coach. The mentor works at two or more steps above the protégé and offers an education in leadership, not job training.

Second, the mentor takes the position as a facilitator, not an advisor. The mentor needs to be a person who knows how to listen and ask questions. “For the most part you’re listening and asking powerful questions,” says Charney.

Third, the mentor needs to have an interest in mentoring others. “You have to want to do it,” says Charney.

4. Outcomes: Retailers must establish realistic, measurable outcomes.

Without goals to measure a program’s success, mentoring can quickly become a chore rather than a meaningful, profitable activity.

At the highest level, the goals of a mentorship program seem obvious: to develop leadership talent. But each retailer likely has finer grain goals that need to be articulated. These goals may relate to reductions in employee turnover or an increase in the percentage of internal promotions. Retailers should set timelines and milestones so mentors and protégés know what they need to aim for.

5. Measurement: Retailers need to measure success and adjust the program accordingly.

Mentoring is the most cost-effective way to develop people. Mentorship programs lose traction for a variety of reasons, including badly matched mentors and protégés. While it is difficult to evaluate the qualitative effects of a mentorship program (i.e., the dynamics of the mentor-protégé interpersonal relationship) retailers can measure and control the quantitative results of mentorship programs.

Here are some ways to measure the program: What percentage of meetings between protégé and mentors actually take place? What is the rate of internal promotions before and after the mentorship program, and between mentored and unmented employees? What is the retention of employees inside and outside the mentoring program? Has job readiness improved among mentees when they progress to a higher level in the company?

Coaching and the independent operator

For independent operators, coaching tends to take priority over mentoring because the day-to-day nature of retail. And this isn’t a bad thing. Coaching is the backbone of retail training.

“Coaching is a constant, situation-by-situation decision-making process,” explains Garry Hapton, owner of The Brass Monocle, an eyewear store that has operated in Calgary since 1980.
Hapton says he uses coaching to fortify his staff’s skills, help staff adapt to changes in product knowledge and serve customers better. Regular coaching helps employees to succeed at their job, and this contributes to employee satisfaction.

Independent operators should cover three areas in their coaching:

1. **Foundational skills:** Hapton says he gives employees lengthy, detailed training on customer service when they are hired. A strong foundation that gives employees the skills they need to assimilate daily coaching that will follow.

2. **Product information:** Coaching can encompass skills development, as it might relate to customer service, or product knowledge. Coaching employees on how products work and how they benefit customers can make employees more confident and help the store develop an expertise in its niche area. One practice that Hapton says works well in his store is to have vendors come to the store to teach employees about new products.

3. **Employee empowerment:** Hapton says he wants to empower his employees so they can make customers happy. He says retailers can use daily coaching to reinforce product knowledge, adjust how individual employees interact with customers and develop lasting relationships with employees.

**Skills a mentor needs**

Good mentors make their protégés more independent. “That’s the objective of a good mentor,” says Charney.

Particular personality types are better suited to mentoring than others. Mentors have faith in others. They are by nature non-judgmental and mature. They lead by asking questions and listening. Not every retail operation will have a surplus of these types of people. But retailers can train potential mentors to develop some of these important skills.

1. **Listening skills:** “Coaches give answers,” says Charney. “Mentors ask questions. They are humble and they know how to listen.”

2. **Questioning skills:** Good mentors don’t provide answers. They ask questions that warrant reflection and let the protégés find answers for themselves. They employ a Socratic method of asking questions, listening for a response and questioning the response.

3. **Advising skills:** Mentors give advice, but they do not dictate a way to act. They provide advice when it is asked of them without ever taking the power of responsibility away from the protégé. They model the behaviours they hope to teach rather than telling mentees how to behave.

4. **Storytelling skills:** Mentors teach through stories. They tell stories in a way that allows the listener to see it for themselves. They don’t moralize. They know their interpretation of the story isn’t the definitive interpretation.

5. **Resourcing skills:** Mentors have resources. They share these resources with the protégés. This might mean lending protégés a good book or putting protégés in touch with another person. They link people and help protégés build networks that will be useful to their professional growth.
A promise to meet regularly. Meeting once a month is advisable. Monthly meetings give mentees time to complete whatever homework the mentor has assigned. Letting too much time to pass between meetings slows down the development.

A promise to focus during the meeting. A mentoring meeting might only last an hour and mentors and mentees need to commit to using the time wisely. This might mean writing into the contract a promise to turn off cell phones during the meeting, coming prepared with questions and completing the homework.

A promise to focus on discussing business. Mentors should strictly adhere to this clause. What mentors don’t want is for mentoring meetings to turn into psychotherapy sessions. Make it a rule to speak only about what happens in the store. Relationship advice, marital counselling, parental guidance—agree to stay away from it.

A promise to speak honestly. Mentoring works best when the mentee can speak honestly about the business. Mentees won’t develop if they tell the mentors what they think the mentors want to hear. Frank talk about the store and the mentee’s professional concerns can lead to more fruitful discussions about career paths and professional development.

A promise to speak fairly. Mentors should make sure that the mentoring sessions don’t turn into gripe sessions. Mentors and mentees should agree at the outset to avoid cynical comments about colleagues or the company.

But what if I’m my own boss?

Large retail organizations have the resources and human capital to make mentorship part of the organization’s culture. But what about independent retailers? Who will mentor the store owner?

Independent retailers can look to their BIAs and local chamber of commerce for mentors. More senior business owners can provide the wisdom that independents won’t find on the web. Another avenue is a business coach. Retail consultants, professional mentors, retired professionals and freelancing retailers can provide the sounding board independents might need.

Finally, independents can search for mentors through Retail Council of Canada. RCC and MySTORE have networks, committees and mentoring programs that can put independents in touch with the senior leaders who can help them advance to a higher level of leadership and retailing.

To access more Retailer’s Guides and other RCC resources that can help you grow your business, visit www.retailcouncil.org/training.