

Mentoring - The Resurgence in ITSM Implementation

By [David Nichols and Janet Kuhn](#)

In today's business environment, an enterprise's competitive advantage is based on its ability to develop leadership capability throughout its organization. This is especially true in IT. Leaders within IT play critical roles in coaching or mentoring their staff to become high-performing teams.

Historically IT organizations have had little difficulty mastering the technical skills required to install, operate and maintain the components of the IT infrastructure. The challenge they face today is how they will manage the transformation of IT from a "technology-focused" organization to one that is a "service provider." Most of the issues they face involve mastering and integrating a combination of technical and soft skills to deliver IT infrastructure management and support as a set of business technology services.

The IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL®) wave broke on North America's shore in the mid-to-late 90's with the potential to retool IT organizations and help them change their technical focus to a service focus. Over the intervening years, the idea of "ITIL" has caught on, but the realization of the potential benefits has fallen short of its potential (as predicted by Gartner's Hype Curve).

With the version 3 refresh of ITIL it has become evident to most IT leadership that an organization does not "implement" ITIL. Rather, the organization must internalize the concepts of ITIL, and make it part of the who and what the IT organization is and its "service culture."

To the Rescue

Mentoring is an idea that dates back to Greek mythology and Homer's Iliad. Mentor was a friend of Odysseus. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War he placed Mentor in charge of his son, Telemachus, and his palace. When Telemachus began his quest for his father, Mentor guided him – not in a geographical 'go there, then there' sense, but, rather, in an intellectual sense to instill an understanding on why he had embarked upon his journey and what rewards lay before him.

Today's definition of a mentor is "a wise and trusted counselor or teacher." They provide their expertise to less experienced individuals in order to help them advance their careers, enhance their education, and build their networks. Many of us who have enjoyed success in our careers can credit much of it to someone taking us "under their wing" and acting as our "wise and trusted teacher."

Mentoring is a "good thing," but other than the historical trade unions where the apprentice learned at the elbow of a designated master, most IT folks rely on serendipity to be in the right place at the right time to meet up with the person they consider to be their mentor. The question becomes, how do you scale a "wise and trusted teacher," and in particular in the context of helping IT organizations internalize the concepts of ITIL?

One-on-one

This method is probably what most people think of when mentoring is mentioned. A mentor and a mentoree enter into a

one-on-one relationship where the mentor spends time teaching and coaching the mentoree. Because people do not necessarily learn in the same manner, this method allows for customizing and fine tuning of the coaching and teaching in order to achieve the desired results.

However, it requires a significant commitment of time and resources. Formal programs have traditionally been used to groom an organization's high-value resources; for example, successor C-level personnel, as well as technical, thought or opinion leaders within the organization. The remainder of the enterprise are "on their own" to find a suitable mentor – if ever.

Mass Mentoring

This may seem like an oxymoron, but it is applicable in the context where a large number of individuals can benefit from the more individual attention of mentor. This often is done in an academic setting in labs or workshops and is effective in providing high numbers of staff with some one-on-one mentoring in a structured and efficient setting.

Of course, as soon as the course is completed, the mentoring disappears.

Emerging Trend

Castling about for a suitable mentor model, IT has focused heavily on the troupe of consultants installed in almost every IT department.

Consultants can be categorized into two broad groups – the "subject matter expert" and the "systems thinker." The former have extensive experience within an industry or a specific technology, and have "been there and done that." The systems thinker uses a methods-based approach, applying multiple disciplines that are applicable across many industries and technologies.

A trend is emerging where we are seeing more and more IT organizations retaining a "systems thinker" to mentor the IT leadership team, and a "subject matter expert" to mentor their management and technical leadership team and staff. Both of these approaches use a combination of mentoring methods.

As a result, the term "consultant" is often used as a synonym for "mentor." Depending on the setting, the mentor can be of either type – subject matter expert or systems thinker.

Extending Mentoring to ITIL

Although mentoring in the form of consultants has been around from the inception of the ITIL, it has proven to be a less-than-optimal solution to the IT organization in its quest to internalize the concepts of IT Service Management and the IT Service Lifecycle.

Typically consulting is suboptimal because it retains a subject matter expert to do a "bottom up" implementation of the ITIL processes, with little or no senior-level IT management involvement or commitment, other than a signature on a PO and a vague vision statement about implementing ITIL.

Many times the results across the entire process spectrum are inconsistent because even highly qualified and credentialed ITIL "experts" claim expertise in only a subset of processes, often service support or the core Service Operation and Transition phase processes.

Similarly ITIL certification training has come up short. As ITIL reached a critical mass in North America, IT organizations trained large numbers of individuals in the hope that an ITIL foundation class would be sufficient to provide their staff the knowledge necessary to "implement ITIL."

Again, consistency of material, delivery and the knowledge of the trainer have a material impact on the effectiveness of

the training, thus the uptake of the ITIL concepts and subsequent internalization “back home.” Probably the largest impact is the qualification and real-life experience and capabilities of the instructor. Someone who knows ITIL, but has no experience, provides limited value to individuals or groups needing a contextual reference for their internalization of the ITIL concepts.

Furthermore, the objective of the certification foundation syllabus is just that – to provide a fundamental level of knowledge about the ITIL terminology and processes, not to discuss all the challenges and wrinkles of an ITIL implementation.

Mentor-in-a-box

Web-based training addresses some of the training issues by ensuring consistency of material and delivery, but comes up short in providing access to an “expert” to ask questions, or to ask questions that would help the student internalize the concepts in the context of their workplace.

The forthcoming generation of remote or on-demand learning recognizes the power of Mentored learning by supplementing the rote slides and learning modules with a geographically desirable (i.e., local) mentor capable of coaching the student one-on-one and providing contextual relevance via e-mail, phone or in person.

Holding the key to success is the local mentor who engages with the learner or the IT organization in a one-on-one basis to amplify the concepts and benefits of ITIL as it relates to their own organization.

Summary

In today’s business environment, mentoring still remains the most powerful method available for achieving results and building organizational capability. And in today’s technical environment, the personal mentor can work with the organization and the individual learner to provide a breadth and contextual emphasis that is nearly impossible to duplicate in either implementation consulting or the traditional classroom environment.

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