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Practical Tips from a J & J Mega-Mentor

An interview with Karan Sorensen,
CIO and Vice President, Information Management,
Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceutical Research & Development, LLC

by Sue Dorward

"I still don't see how she does it all!" I reflected as I walked back to my car after a two-hour interview with Karan Sorensen at a J & J facility in Raritan, New Jersey. A newly-minted CIO who also is pursuing her Ph.D. in technology management and has a second job as a single mother of three teenagers, Ms. Sorensen still finds time ("makes time," as she puts it) to mentor 35 people. No, that's not a typo. Thirty-five!

Every Friday, for the entire day, Ms. Sorensen mentors J & J employees. While some are technical like she is, others are in business functions like finance, sales or marketing. Going far beyond what most J & J mentors take on, Ms. Sorensen also mentors additional employees informally and in group mentoring sessions. She says, "It's a great way to kick off the weekend!"

J & J's commitment to employee development supports Ms. Sorensen's mentoring activities. She explains that "employee development is a pervasive part of J & J culture, part of the DNA here. Our philosophy is to invest in people and success will follow. Through our succession planning process, we identify, coach, and develop high potential employees, to be the best that they can be, fully engaged. As a result, employee retention is exceptionally high. I've been here for four years, but I'm still the 'new kid on the block' because there are so many people who have been here for 20 or 30 years."

WHY

Why does she do it? "I feel that mentoring is the most important thing I can be doing for the company. I'm developing the next generation of leaders. As a mentor, it is more rewarding for you than you would ever expect. And it's amazing how fast the organization will recognize the value."

What's more, mentoring yields results. We've all heard that most successful leaders have a series of mentors throughout their professional lives. Ms. Sorensen sees evidence of this everyday. "Mentoring empowers people to give

breakthrough performance, to achieve what they would not have before. People sometimes need someone to believe in them before they believe in themselves. Or they just need a kick in the pants. I have seen so many people just blossom, from good to great to 'next practices.' They become leaders among leaders." More concretely, she has seen sales people significantly increase their sales and other employees receive awards, recognition, and monetary benefits subsequent to being mentored by her. Ms. Sorensen attributes their success - at least in part - to mentoring.

WHAT

What do people talk about with their mentors, that they can't talk to their managers about? Actually, Ms. Sorensen does mentor her direct reports, meeting with each of them weekly to talk explicitly about them, not about their projects. In this way she ensures that she spends quality time with her staff.

However, some employees seek confidential assistance with things that they just can't talk about with their managers. Ms. Sorensen explains, "We have an understanding that mentoring conversations are confidential. It's a safe harbor, non-judgmental, and we can talk about anything. The only exception is if I hear about anything illegal or unethical, which is rare. Then I point the person to the appropriate support structures in the company for follow-up."

Mentoring conversations can cover many different subjects. According to Ms. Sorensen, "You never know where you're going to go in these conversations. You'll talk about their hopes and dreams and how to get there, their yellow brick road." Employees regularly seek mentoring from her in the following areas:

- reviewing performance self-appraisals before they are submitted,
- preparing for performance review, promotion, and raise conversations with their managers,
- discovering answers to questions such as "What am I doing that makes me be seen as a manager and not a director? What are they looking for?",
- dealing with staff performance problems,
- becoming a kinder, more empathetic manager without being seen as weak,
- and developing executive presence and confidence.

HOW

Given that Ms. Sorensen is probably the most experienced and dedicated mentor I will ever meet, I had to ask her for advice on how to develop successful mentoring relationships. She offers the ten tips below.

Choosing a Mentor

TIP 1. "Never force an employee to be mentored - it's just a waste of time!" Talk to the employee about his or her career goals and development needs to see if mentoring is appropriate and welcome. If the employee would like to have a mentor, work together to find a good match in terms of development needs and personality.

TIP 2. Employees should look for mentors who are two levels above them in the organization, someone not too far away but not in their direct management chain.

TIP 3. Ask the employee to observe a few mentor candidates. "Who makes you feel comfortable with their approach? Who are you drawn to and why? You want to respect and trust them, but not feel afraid of them or idolize them. Look for someone you want to be *like*, not someone you want to *be*. There needs to be good chemistry, because you want to feel comfortable talking with your mentor about difficult subjects."

First Meeting

TIP 4. Once an interested and appropriate mentor is identified, the mentor and the employee meet to see if they are a good match for each other. Ms. Sorensen suggests focusing on getting to know each other, possibly not even talking about work during this meeting. "I'll spend 60 to 90 minutes in the first meeting. I ask thought-provoking questions, such as 'What's fun for you?' or 'If this wasn't your job, what would you choose to do?' It gets them thinking away from work and about themselves - not what they've *done*, but who they *are*."

TIP 5. "Don't waste time mentoring someone who is trying to use you politically. Sometimes they just want to find out how to get their next promotion, and are looking for help and influence in doing that. Make your expectations clear. Mentoring does not mean going out and promoting them to others. These conversations are for their development. Being a mentor means a long-term investment in them, a true commitment."

Making Mentoring Worthwhile

TIP 6. Don't set up regularly-scheduled mentoring meetings. Ms. Sorensen encourages employees to ask for what they need when they need it, so that when they request a meeting she knows that the time will be focused and well-spent. She also knows that the need may be urgent, so she makes an extra effort to make herself available, even outside of work hours if necessary.

TIP 7. Encourage the people you mentor to become mentors themselves. "They'll gain a better understanding of how to make the most of our meetings, and they'll see themselves differently." They may mentor employees from other business disciplines, for even more learning.

TIP 8. Here's an exercise for helping employees develop executive presence and confidence: "I go through employees' resumes with them, and ask about the meaning, impact and significance that they have usually omitted from the work descriptions. Based on our discussions, I create my own version to share with them. This helps employees gain a whole different level of appreciation and respect for what they've done. Then the executive presence starts to show up - but it's all based on their accomplishments, not inflated ego. They start seeing themselves at the level they aspire to."

TIP 9. Know when to end the mentoring relationship. "It's the mentor's responsibility to be cognizant of what the employee needs, and to provide a graceful way to exit the relationship when it's no longer adding value. You need to know when to pass the baton. When I feel I can no longer be of use to an employee, I may say 'I don't know that there is anything I can give you besides support. You've grown beyond me.' Then I point them to another mentor for what they need next."

TIP 10. Ask for feedback on how you are doing as a mentor, so that you are constantly improving. Ms. Sorensen notes that mentors need to really welcome and be receptive to feedback, not just go through the motions. She jokes, "Just don't tell me I'm dumb, fat, or ugly. You'll hurt my feelings. Other than that, I'm open to it."

Just Do It

For managers and engineers who are new to mentoring, Ms. Sorensen offers these final words of advice: "If you've never mentored or had a mentor, try it out. Be honest and say that you're new to it. The rewards are so much greater than the anxiety of not knowing what it's about."

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