

Innovative Mentoring Program Promotes Networking, Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

An Overview of CU Boulder's Infrastructure and Safety Mentor Program

What do you envision when you think of mentoring in higher education? The first thing that probably comes to mind is a faculty/student mentor/mentee relationship. While mentoring is common on the academic side of the house, it has not widely taken hold in the administrative realm in most institutions. But at the University of Colorado Boulder, an award-winning mentoring program initiated in the facilities management department in 2012 is blazing a trail. In fact, due to its success and popularity over the past four years, the program expanded in the fall of 2016 and is now offered to all four campus departments that report to the vice chancellor for infrastructure and safety. The program is now called the Infrastructure and Safety Mentor Program (ISMP) and is offered to almost 600 university staff.

Why Mentoring?

CU Boulder's facilities management department employs more than 500 people and provides a diverse array of services and programs to the university through five divisional areas — utility and energy services; business services; planning, design and construction; operations; and human resources. Four years ago, when a campus-sponsored mentoring program in which many facilities management staff members participated was discontinued, Andrew Mead of the department's HR division and a group of facilities management staff decided to create their own department mentoring program.

The Facilities Management Mentor Program (FMMP) was designed to provide CU Boulder staff an opportunity for professional and personal development and ongoing learning. This same goal statement applies to the expanded ISMP and now provides even more opportunities to more campus staff in a variety of programs and services. The program focus still includes the key elements of enhanced employee engagement, increased retention, career and personal skills development, knowledge transfer and

improved departmental functioning by developing staff through various activities and opportunities. Says Mead, "The program provides an engaging and enriching career and personal development experience for participants, with the goal of equipping people for a lifetime of self-managed learning."

The mentor program is a voluntary program in which mentors and mentees are partnered according to their specific areas of interest, such as enhancing personal and professional skills and abilities, career development or leadership skills. Participants can choose who they would like to be paired with or can request that the program match them up with someone. Once the mentors and mentees are paired, it is up to them to develop a plan of action, with support from Mead as the program manager. The program runs each year from September to May, with mentors and mentees meeting at least two hours per month (however, most choose to meet more often).

Success From the Get-Go

From the very beginning, the program has seen high levels of management commitment and employee involvement. To date:

- 64 mentor/mentee teams have completed the program;
- All levels of staff from each of the infrastructure and safety areas are represented;
- 32 percent of current participants are alumni of the program;
- The majority of department managers and directors have served as mentors in the program; and
- The participation rate has increased every year since the program's inception, with 27 teams participating in the 2016-17 session.

“Having our top leadership actively participate in the program has provided a great resource and has set a great example for our employees,” says Mead.

Adds David Danielson, CU Boulder’s assistant vice chancellor for facilities management, “The mentor program has far and away exceeded my expectations. Past participants have expressed an enthusiastic endorsement of the program, as it has proved to be an unbelievable growth experience for our team members both professionally and personally. Mentors and mentees participate in the program because they genuinely want to help each other learn, network and ultimately succeed in their goals. With the expansion of the mentor program, I anticipate even greater opportunities for employee development and engagement.”

Benefits Realized

The program has helped increase employee engagement, facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing, and expand participants’ knowledge, skills and abilities. It has helped

facilitate the transfer of learning into practice, helped build employees’ confidence, helped identify and engage emerging leaders, and helped build and extend networks both within the specific campus departments and across the entire university.

Two Keys to Success

According to Mead, the success of the mentor program has exceeded his (and senior leadership’s) expectations. When asked what advice he would give to other organizations looking to implement a similar program, he says that leadership support and perceived value are paramount to success and sustainability. “Support from and participation of organizational leadership must be present from the beginning,” he says. “And employees must see the benefit and value in participating. The program must be well thought out, well planned and well administered in order to provide that benefit and value. If these two elements are in place, chances are you’ll see great participation, great enthusiasm and great success.” 

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