

Circles of Knowledge

Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) employs approximately 6,400 faculty and staff and offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in eight schools on its 155-acre main campus. As a large, decentralized institution, business practices are implemented by leadership in the different departments and units to meet the needs of individual management centers. While this level of operational flexibility has its benefits, one downside is that ensuring information flow between and among the various departments and divisions can be challenging.

In early 2010, CWRU's organizational development and learning (ODL) division began exploring ways to enhance the exchange and sharing of knowledge across campus. Out of this need for a better understanding among staff members of how the work of all CWRU divisions, departments and offices intersects and how individuals can leverage personal and professional connections to enrich their own work came the Staff Mentoring Circles program. The idea was to break down silos, facilitate collaboration and communication, enhance personal and professional skills, and re-engage staff.

The Groundwork

To get the mentoring program up and running, the ODL division formed an advisory committee consisting of individuals from several campus units. This initial step not only provided ODL and committee members the opportunity to broaden and deepen their understanding of needs and opportunities, but also conveyed to stakeholders the importance the university placed on employees' perspectives. The committee considered options for the most appropriate structure for the program and ultimately concluded that a group mentoring approach best aligned

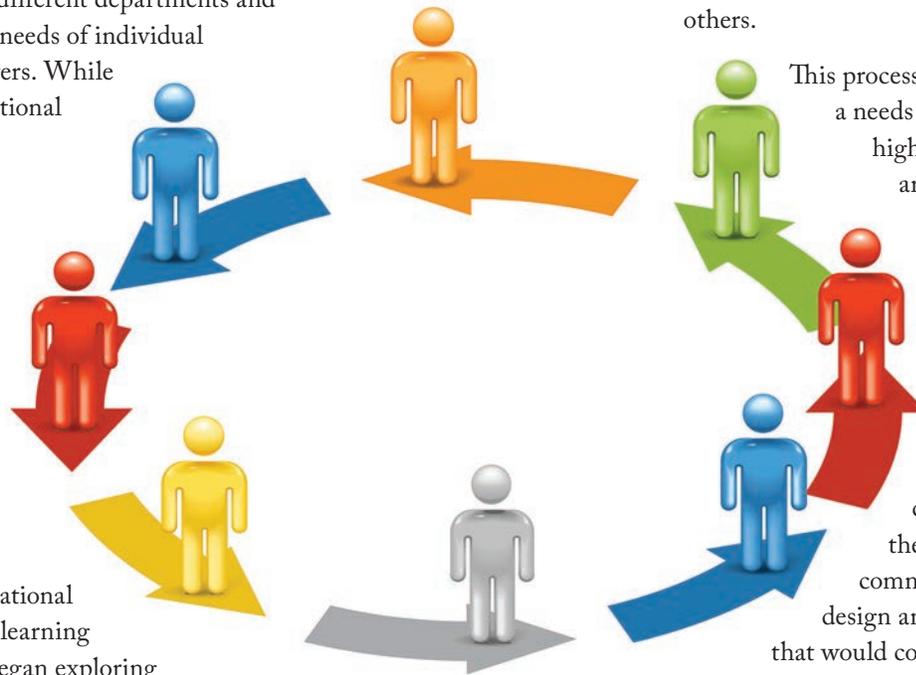
with the initiative's goals. The committee then set out to recruit potential mentees and mentors. Mentee candidates were identified through focus groups, and potential mentors consisted of senior leaders (deans, directors, vice presidents) from across the university who possessed both the desire and the ability to influence and engage others.

This process was followed by a needs assessment that highlighted four key areas important to mentees: networking skills, leadership presence, managing professional relationships and career development. Over the next year, the committee worked to design an inclusive program that would combine coaching and mentoring, serve as a support network for creative problem solving, and help to build strategies for career development.

The first Staff Mentoring Circles program was rolled out in fall 2011. Participation was limited to 21 mentees and registration was on a first-come, first-served basis. The roster was full in less than 10 minutes. Due to the popularity of the program, in spring 2012, the number of participants was increased to 28.

The Program

Each mentoring cohort consists of 28 mentees divided into four groups, with each individual in the group representing a different department/division (thus ensuring participants are exposed to a wide range of campus units), and three senior-level mentors. The program runs eight months, with mentoring circles meeting once per month for 90 minutes during the lunch hour. Mentees remain together as a cohort and in their circles throughout the program, while the mentors rotate between the four groups. Mentors are expected to facilitate conversations and to serve as



a resource for professional development. Individual mentoring sessions are not a component of the program, but an option for mentors to consider. The program also encourages peer-to-peer mentoring/networking to enhance professional growth and build bonds among colleagues.

“The Staff Mentoring Circles program is designed to enhance personal and professional skills and help staff members and leaders forge new relationships and develop strategies for collaboration between and among various campus divisions,” says Carolyn Gregory, CWRU’s vice president for human resources. “Additionally, the program encourages and promotes the melding of diverse thoughts, work styles, personalities, generations and cultures across campus and cultivates a learning community where employees and executive leaders learn and grow together.”

The Outcomes

Now in its fourth year, the program continues to draw significant interest and positive feedback, says Gregory. “Both mentors and mentees benefit in myriad ways,” she says. “By acting as mentors, senior leaders are exposed

to the emerging talent pool; enhance their coaching, leadership and management skills; and increase their generational awareness.” According to Gregory, mentors also have facilitated greater transparency about the goals of the university. Mentees, meanwhile, have reported an increased understanding of the culture of the university; more opportunities for meaningful professional development; an exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences; a way to identify and remedy potential skills gaps within themselves; and the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and explore their potential.

The Staff Mentoring Circles program not only enables Case Western staff to build relationships with a diverse network of mentors across campus, but also provides opportunities for them to approach their work in new and different ways, says Gregory. “The program fosters open communication, encourages a high level of employee engagement, and aids employees’ understanding of the university’s complexities and uniqueness and how individuals can contribute to helping the university reach an even greater potential.” 

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