

Guest Column | April 14, 2021

The Art Of Coaching And Mentoring In Life Sciences Manufacturing

Tunnell Consulting's Edgar Guerzon has spent most of his 36-year career in the biopharmaceutical industry on, or very close to, the manufacturing floor. Consulting with start-ups and established players in pharmaceuticals and life sciences, he has provided a full range of services to these companies, including FDA Remediation, Compliance, GMP Validation, Project Management, and Lean Six Sigma. Invariably, he finds himself being asked to go the "extra step" and coach and mentor groups of manufacturing staff on industry expectations and best practices. And being a person who loves to teach, he has embraced the opportunity to pass his knowledge along. Here are some of his views on this "art" and how it provides real value during a client engagement.



Edgar Guerzon

What in your view, is the difference between coaching and mentoring?

I see coaching as a training assignment, similar to a supervisor training a new hire. Mentoring, to me, means developing someone to their full professional potential. I firmly believe that in combination, coaching and mentoring are not just skills, but an art form—the ability to convey your message to a person or group and be both listened to and heard—which can benefit staff members immeasurably. They frequently overlap in a client engagement.

How do you begin a coaching and/or mentoring assignment?

It's important to start the process with a plan. Prior to meeting a group to be coached or mentored, I'll present the project plan to the client, including the initial presentation, feedback forms, and a progress tracker—key to the project's deliverable. At that time, I can also confirm with the client exactly what the group's needs are. For a group working on a manufacturing floor, operators generally must understand not only procedure, but also the regulations behind the procedures, so I can build that element into the sessions. If it's possible, I'll also set up a shared folder for the project's files.

When the group and I get together, I begin by establishing rapport and credibility, and then get down to how we'll proceed. For example, in launching a series of sessions with QA and manufacturing floor staff, I give them a sense of my years of experience as a supervisor, manager, director and site head in the biopharmaceutical industry, so they see that I understand what their battles are. Then, keeping in mind that their supervisors will be looking to track staff progress, I'll let everyone know I'll be recording individual coaching and mentoring sessions. I've also found it's a good idea to ask each participant to fill out a form outlining their level of experience, years in their current role, and what they expect to get out of these sessions.

It's important to note that coaching and mentoring opportunities should not be exclusively for Monday-Friday dayshift staff, but for all. So the coach's/mentor's availability is important. In fact, I believe evening and weekend shift personnel frequently benefit the most since they don't have the real-time department support that dayshift employees do.

What skills are most important in a coach/mentor?

Certainly, the ability to communicate effectively is key, whether I'm conveying information verbally, in written form and/or through body language. That's why I adhere to what I call the "CCC" precept—be clear, concise and cogent to your mentees. I teach my mentees to do the same.

Of course, the current pandemic has forced life sciences, and many other industries, away from the manufacturing floor, adapting to online meetings. As a result, during this period, to see how effectively a group is communicating, I'll critique their emails, phone calls and texts to gauge not just how they deliver messages, but also how they react to feedback. It has been said that a trait of a good leader is being a good communicator and I subscribe to that for myself, and I aspire to that for my mentees.

Second to communication might be the ability to correctly assess your pupil/mentee. The initial feedback forms will help with customizing a syllabus for each individual based on experience levels. But it will be through observation that you can assess less tangible qualities, like leadership potential, Type A folks, team-oriented players, etc.

Given the current long-distance nature of communicating, it's difficult for a coach/mentor to gauge body language, eye contact (or lack thereof), or the full context of a pupil's/mentee's demeanor. The best way to truly drive home a message is to do it in person. I look forward to the day when we can do that again.

Do you have a coaching/mentoring "check list" that guides the whole process?

In a way, yes. It sometimes varies per assignment, but in general, I observe:

- How the pupil/mentee works—in other words, I will ask him or her to describe how they proceed through their workday.
- What their knowledge and understanding of the manufacturing process is—I'll have them explain the process in their own words.
- How good are their personnel interactions for Quality Assurance—I want to understand their ability to provide a compliance consult.
- What kind of leadership and instructional ability do they have in a manufacturing setting—I learned, as I rose up through the ranks, that titles are a designation of position, but respect must be earned. Say, for example, I want to look at how a floor supervisor gives orders and manages direct reports. Are they timid, aggressive—are they respectful when addressing a subordinate? Then we review what I've seen in a one-on-one session.
- How effective are they at conveying a message, whether via email, texts/chats, phone calls, memos, reports, etc.—I ask to be copied or forwarded the communications to evaluate their skill level, and then offer constructive criticism. Sometimes it can be about content, at other times, format.
- Time management—I want to know how an assignment or task is managed and prioritized. I ask to see a current assignment and we review the mentee's approach, taking into consideration effective planning, setting deadlines, goals and objectives, delegating responsibility, and time allocation.
- Conflict resolution behavior—In a difficult situation, are they combative, collaborative, compromising, accommodating or avoiding? We discuss the importance of conflict and how it can actually help an organization.

Did you have a mentor? Where did you meet and what did you learn from them?

Yes, I did. When I started in the industry in 1984 with Lederle Labs in Pearl River, New York, I was lucky enough to have Walter Kurilla, the supervising biologist, as my boss. We were working with cell cultures, growing mammalian cells for vaccine production. Early in our relationship, he told me he “saw something” in me and took me under his wing. He wanted to teach me not only what he had done right as he grew in his career, but also, to let me know the decisions he made that didn't turn out well so I could avoid them. So, Walter bought me a standard “Composition” notebook—the kind students use—and said he would offer his coaching tips in the front of the notebook, and in the back, he'd summarize all the times he'd messed up. Over the four or five years we worked together, as I was being groomed to replace him, we compiled specific work-related information, and equally important, insights regarding how to treat co-workers—from trainees to managers—that still inform my approach today.

About Edgar Guerzon

Tunnell Consulting's Edgar Guerzon is a biopharmaceutical professional with 36+ years' experience within the Manufacturing and Quality Assurance industries. He has provided consulting services to both emerging and major consulting firms for Biotech/Pharmaceutical & Medical Devices and the areas of FDA Remediation, Compliance, GMP Validation, Project Management & Lean Six Sigma. He has authored and executed Validation Protocols (IQ/OQ/PQ), SOPs and reports, Global Policies and Global Procedures and Validation documents and reports for Process Analytical Technology (PAT). He has been responsible for the implementation, maintenance and continuous improvement of Site Quality Systems to ensure the manufacturing of high-quality products, on time, at competitive prices.

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