In this vignette, Moses has concluded that a number of her new direct reports are underperforming at least in part because of a variety of skills deficits. Moses has the advantage of being a newcomer; she has no old expectations to renegotiate or habits to unlearn. She also faces a number of challenges: She may not have the time to meet regularly with everyone who could benefit from additional mentoring, and she may herself not have some of the skills her direct reports need to learn. Beyond these basic concerns are a host of more subtle considerations: How strongly should
she push people? Whom should she give slack to? How long should she give it to them? And how can she ensure mentoring is deepening, rather than weakening, her working relationships? Exceptional leaders can often be distinguished from good leaders according to how well they recognize and address these questions.

WHAT IS MENTORING, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In this context, we define Mentoring as all of the actions leaders take to support the long-term growth of their direct reports. Of particular concern are the career goals these individuals have. Do staff members feel they are moving ahead in their jobs and careers? Are they able to increase their responsibilities, either in their present positions or in expanded positions? Do they feel free to openly explore opportunities in other areas of the organization or even outside the organization?

Mentoring means you invest the time to understand the career aspirations of your direct reports; work with direct reports to create engaging mentoring plans; support staff in developing their skills; support career development in a nonpossessive way (e.g., support staff moving up and out as necessary for their advancement); find stretch assignments and other delegation opportunities that support skill development; and model professional development by advancing your own skills.

We focus particular attention on the relationship and the goals rather than the means because the activities will differ depending on both the direct report’s needs and the leader’s capabilities to personally address those needs.

Returning to the vignette, Moses’s framing of her direct reports’ performance problems leads her to conclude that a focus on mentoring is necessary. However, in our experience, providing mentoring is a staple for all exceptional leaders, not just for those in situations that so obviously need this attention. This is true regardless of the overall performance level of the department or organization; in fact, mentoring is more likely to happen in teams that are already high performing—it may be how they got that way in the first place.

WHEN HIGHLY EFFECTIVE LEADERS MENTOR

In our experience, the following qualities are hallmarks of mentorship in highly effective leaders.
Taking a Comprehensive Approach

The most effective mentors focus attention on *all* of their direct reports. Returning to the vignette that started this chapter, Moses recognizes the need to mentor this group of leaders but appears to be in some danger of falling into a common trap: focusing on the “problem children.” The departments in the red are likely to be the ones she herself will be under scrutiny for, so a bias toward attending to these groups is understandable. But what about the departments that are performing well? In addition to fixing problems, a highly effective mentor will also seek ways to make good departments great and to turn great departments into world-class operations.

Building on Relationships

For you to be a highly effective mentor, your direct reports must come to believe their individual interests will be well served by listening to you. The first step in this process is developing a clear understanding of your direct reports’ interests and goals. Mentoring will be most powerful when it focuses on individuals’ needs as well as the needs of the organization.

Highly effective leaders meet routinely with each of their direct reports to explore career goals. Once they gain an understanding of how individuals would like to see their jobs, careers, and areas of accountability over the next several years, they can then discuss areas for improvement, simultaneously looking for ways by which these improvements can also serve the individual’s goals.

Emphasizing Clear, Consistent Follow-Through

As our emphasis on the relationship suggests, high-performance mentoring requires a long-term commitment to the process. In addition to starting strong, exceptional leaders robustly build the mentoring process into their workflow. Many of these leaders have regularly scheduled meetings with their direct reports to focus on mentoring; the meetings may not be frequent, but they are held consistently.

Participating in Staff Development

In a high-performance approach to staff development, the leader will actively work with staff on skill development. For example, if an off-site educational program is called for, the leader will have some involvement in helping the staff select an
appropriate one. When the program is complete, the leader will find time to discuss what was learned with the staff. Forethought will also be given to opportunities in which the new skills could be practiced on the job, so that these opportunities for application and reinforcement of learning are taken.

Encouraging Growth

Exceptional leaders recognize that higher-performing staff are also more employable elsewhere, but that does not stop them from developing their staff. They understand that the value of being viewed as a powerful mentor exceeds the cost of replacing staff when they outgrow their roles. How can this be? Consider the references coming from previous employees. A job with a strong mentor is described as a valuable learning opportunity—one that helped them prepare for the even better position they now hold. A job with a weak mentor is described as a dead end—one that the former staff members “escaped” to accept their new position.

WHEN MENTORING IS NOT ALL IT COULD BE

In several common situations, mentoring is not as effective as it might be. The ones we have encountered most frequently include the following.

Undervaluing Mentoring

If leaders do not view mentoring as an essential part of their roles, chances are it will fall by the wayside. For some leaders, the driving force is left too much in the hands of their staff; they mentor the direct reports who make a point of demanding it, and they are far less attentive to everyone else. The typical result is that the vocal high performers continue to develop their skills, the quiet high performers get frustrated about being passed over, the low performers are ignored until they become serious problems, and the B players never get any better. Some leaders do not even make the initial investment in learning their staff’s career goals—or, if they do, they fail to internalize them or at least write them down somewhere accessible.

Another way mentoring can fall short is if leaders view mentorship as about supporting training rather than about the relationship. We see this in leaders whose automatic reactions to performance improvement needs are to send staff to an off-site conference, workshop, or class. While these approaches can be very helpful in
improving knowledge, they usually do little to develop skills and even less to ensure that skills transfer successfully to the staff’s workplace.

**Undervaluing Staff Development**

Some leaders take a more fatalistic “you either have it or you don’t” view of skill development. These leaders may not have well-developed abilities to track performance improvement over time, or they may take an overly informal approach to this process. As a result, these leaders tend to think performance levels are more static than they really are.

For some leaders, this tendency shows up as a bias toward replacing people rather than mentoring them. In senior-level positions in particular, many organizations show a bias toward hiring outside talent rather than developing it from within.

**Being Too Possessive**

Some leaders are overly possessive of their staff. These leaders may actively avoid mentoring staff out of fear that they will outgrow their positions and leave. Other leaders create barriers to their staff working on some developmental projects out of a fear that other departments will poach them. They may mistakenly believe that if they don’t develop their team members, those members are more likely to stay put; in reality, their higher-performing staff in particular are more likely to leave if they don’t feel that they are developing in their job.

**Lacking Mentoring Skills**

Mentoring can also fall short because of a lack of skills in the mentoring process itself. Some of these skills relate back to our discussion of feedback in Chapter 7. Others relate to the leader’s ability to recognize the naturally occurring opportunities for direct reports to develop skills.

Let us consider the latter point in more depth. Think about how you decide who does what in your own department or organization. Chances are, most work goes to the individuals you believe will do the best job, either because of past experiences or relevant skills. Indeed, our industry’s approach to human resources is essentially designed to ensure that this is the case. With this in mind, it becomes easier to see how mentoring involves some unnatural approaches to work, at least on occasion. From the mentoring perspective, the question is not always “Who will be most successful at this task?” but rather “Who stands to learn the most from working on this task?”
MISUSE AND OVERUSE: HOW MENTORING CAN WORK AGAINST YOU

If mentoring was taken to the logical extreme, we would no longer have a place of productive work. Instead, we would have a place of education. Of course, an organization can stay in business only if the economic contributions of staff exceed the size of their paychecks, so the learning aspects of a job can be taken only so far. The ideal balance finds the sweet spot that maximizes both organizational performance and individual development. But when this balance either leans too far toward mentoring or is not well executed, the following pitfalls might be seen.

Miscommunicating Developmental Decisions

Developing highly effective mentoring relationships requires regular communication, and sometimes not just with the individual receiving the mentoring. Direct reports are often quick to view learning opportunities, even developmental assignments, as being doled out unfairly. Developmental decisions often make good sense, but their rationale is often not well communicated to staff. In these
situations, sometimes the best remedy is simply to better articulate how these decisions are made, attending in particular to any skill development needs that a staff member may feel are not receiving appropriate attention. However, leaders should also avoid dismissing concerns about fairness too quickly; uneven attention to developmental needs is a reality in many leadership teams.

**Overemphasizing Star Performers**

When it comes to mentoring, star performers represent a mixed blessing. On the positive side, they tend to yield the highest returns on the time their leaders invest in them. But for this reason, they also tend to receive more of the leaders’ focus to the detriment of other staff. Some leaders have a misguided notion that focusing attention on the stars will inspire the now-jealous B players to try harder so they can also reap their rewards. While this tactic may work for some direct reports, others may become less motivated, and their efforts may actually decline.

**Failing to Address Performance Problems**

The one area in which some leaders face a genuine risk of overdoing mentoring is in working with staff who are chronically underperforming in their roles. In some cases, the cost of mentoring someone into a role definitely exceeds the return. Sometimes the problem stems from escalating commitment: Leaders may start to view the considerable time they spent building the staff’s skills as a sunk cost that they need to recoup; giving up on a staff member’s ability to learn a given skill set begins to feel like a personal failure on the leader’s part. For other leaders, the problem may stem from discomfort in addressing performance problems and/or transitioning poor performers out of roles that are beyond their capabilities. A leader who overidentifies with her staff or who overpersonalizes her role is at particular risk for this vulnerability.

**Misuse and Overuse: How Mentoring Others Can Work Against You**

A focus on mentoring can work against a leader in any of the following ways:

- Miscommunicating developmental decisions
  - The rationale for mentoring is not well explained or justified to the team.
  - The leader is viewed as playing favorites.

(continued)
Finding Role Models

We have described mentoring as a complex, multifaceted aspect of the leader–direct report relationship; as such, the most appropriate people to help you develop your skills will depend on the specific skills for which you have the greatest need.

In the broadest sense, the best mentors are leaders who have promoted many direct reports. If your organization has a more formal mentoring program in place (e.g., a program that matches junior managers with senior leaders who are not typically in their direct chain of command), strong mentors may have been identified already by whoever is in charge of the program. You might check first with that person for his recommendations.

For help in developing your skills in the mechanics of the mentoring process, leaders who are also educators are often good people to seek out. Examples include department chairs who regularly work with post-docs (particularly if their placement record is strong), executives who work with administrative fellows (assuming the placements are favorably evaluated), or senior clinicians who have reputations as outstanding preceptors. Mentoring is also the stock and trade of many executive coaches; in addition to using these skills in their practices, they are often called on to teach leaders these skills.

Additional Opportunities for Personal Development

Mentoring is a skill that develops only with practice. If you are not currently in a role where you have direct reports, find analogous opportunities to work with others on developing their skills. Agreeing to work with an intern (paid or unpaid) can be an excellent way to practice and to learn; leadership roles in community...
organizations can also provide valuable mentoring experience. If your organization has a mentoring program in place, inquire about participating.

Attending local professional education events, especially the shorter lunch or dinner sessions, can also provide mentoring opportunities. These events are frequently attended by younger professionals who are actively seeking professional and career growth. Visiting with them over dinner or during receptions can provide good opportunities to provide counsel and respond to questions.

We encourage you to visit the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) website (www.ache.org) to review its information on mentoring. ACHE supports a virtual mentorship program called the Leadership Mentoring Network. Using its resources or accessing the ACHE local chapter and/or the area ACHE Regent can provide a great opportunity to find a mentor or to become one yourself.

Although coaching is the kind of skill that can be difficult to convey in a book, several good books are available. One is *Coaching for Performance* by John Whitmore (2002). In this technique-focused book, Whitmore adapts sports coaching approaches for use in the workplace.

If you want to work on your relationships with poor performers, we recommend *Crucial Confrontations* by Patterson and colleagues (2005). This text argues compellingly for addressing performance problems proactively and provides approaches to doing so for the most challenging of circumstances.

**SUMMARY**

In recent years, the considerable pressure to do more with less has translated into fewer managers doing the same or more work. It also means a larger number of entry-level leaders must compete for the mentoring attention of fewer senior-level leaders. Thus investing in the development of more junior staff through mentoring relationships is all the more difficult but all the more valuable. If you find yourself questioning the time you spend mentoring, we encourage you to spend a few minutes reflecting on the help you received as an early careerist, and let these memories energize you about paying it forward.

**Consider This**

Develop a business case for mentoring. Answer the following questions:

1. How will mentoring be defined? How will the program’s success be measured?
2. Should mentors come from inside the organization or from the outside?

(continued)
3. Will mentors be paid any stipend or bonus for their service?
4. Should any individual be eligible to receive mentorship?
5. What training should mentors receive?
6. How often should mentors meet with their mentees?
7. Should the mentoring program be separate from the organizational succession plan?
8. Should the mentorship program be run by human resources or by an outside expert? Should an individual be empowered to intervene if problems surface between mentors and mentees?
9. Should the mentoring program be built into the leadership development program? The high-potential leadership program?

Consider This

Elizabeth Parris held this conversation with human resources VP Jim Batten: “Jim, we really do not have much of a succession plan for either our senior leaders or our middle managers. I think this is a serious weakness. Come to the senior team meeting in the next couple of months and present a plan of action that the group can discuss.”

Assume you are the consultant helping Batten develop this plan. Develop a detailed outline that contains all of the action steps and key milestones for this plan. Be certain to address the role that mentoring can play in the succession planning process.

REFERENCES
