

# Mentoring with a Theme



**Mentoring programs have existed**, both formally and informally, within organizations for decades. Mentoring is a known method to help employees develop personally and professionally while being more engaged and connected to their organization. As large-scale mentoring programs become more commonplace and easier to manage, organizations are starting to look at ways to expand these programs to connect a larger population. An easy way to do this is with a themed mentoring program.

Themed mentoring, also known as a mentoring circle, is a flexible format of mentoring that is primarily participant-driven. These programs offer mentoring in a group setting where individuals can connect around a central topic or theme. Like a traditional mentoring program, themed mentoring groups still require a primary purpose or strategy to guide the program and help participants set goals. Even if the group is hobby-based, there is still knowledge sharing and professional growth occurring between individuals and within the entire group. Themed mentoring differs from traditional programs in three main areas.

**1. Themed mentoring allows for flexible roles.** Unlike a traditional mentoring relationship where there is a known mentor and mentee, themed mentoring allows for everyone to be an expert. Each member has unique experiences and knowledge to bring to the group and by removing labels, the group encourages a more dynamic conversation where everyone can learn from each other. You never know what experiences someone brings to the table and what they may be an expert in. Frequently, organizations opt to have an appointed moderator to ensure the group remains on track and to help facilitate the discussion.

**2. In themed mentoring, participation can be optional.**

Participation is usually voluntary and based on the employee's availability and desire to attend. This is especially true when themed mentoring is used as a social outlet or to support employee resource groups (ERGs). However, be mindful of your organization's goals, as participation may be required in some programs, such as supporting leadership in your organization. Creating a group for your leaders to connect and support one another socially has goals and participation requirements that are entirely different from a leadership development group which is focused on learning role-specific competencies and soft skills.

**3. Themed mentoring has flexible timing.** Like a conversation, themed mentoring will ebb and flow with the topic of conversation. Traditional mentoring programs typically have set enrollment periods and relationship timelines. With themed mentoring, the program starts and continues until the program fades or there is no longer a need for the topic. Participants are encouraged to enter and leave the group as their needs change. In some cases, like a project-based themed mentoring group, the group will start with the recruitment of participants and end when the project is over.

As themed mentoring reinvents how organizations are thinking of mentoring programs as a whole, the opportunities for incorporating themed mentoring are endless. Recently, as the workforce has shifted to a work-from-home model, themed mentoring is used as a social outlet for people to connect and maintain relationships. One organization, Nielsen, implemented themed mentoring after receiving requests from employees for additional ways to connect. As their population of associates started working from home, Nielsen held global listening sessions to understand what their employees needed and how the company could support them. As a result of the listening sessions, Nielsen noticed trends in themes and sprang into action to enable associates around the world to support one another. Topics of interest included tips for working from home, hobbies and healthy living. Here are other ways companies are starting to use themed mentoring:

**1. To complement a 1:1 mentoring relationship.** Themed mentoring can be used to enhance 1:1 mentoring relationships by providing access to a larger group in which the mentee can continue learning from their peers. This is mostly seen within career development programs. For example, you can use a group mentoring format as part of employee onboarding. In the 1:1 relationship, a new employee typically meets with a more experienced

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employee in their field that will help the employee through the onboarding process. In addition, the employee is grouped with other individuals going through the same process. In this group, employees can share their progress, ask for insight, and build their network of internal contacts.

**2. To provide resources for employees.**

Themed mentoring is becoming increasingly popular for sharing company information and resources with groups of people. These groups can be set up around any topic that employees need to navigate, from life events to company policy. With people now working from home, themed mentoring supporting homeschooling children, adapting to working remotely, work/life balance, and discussing new company policy and procedures have started taking hold.

**3. As a social outlet.** Humans are social creatures. One of the best parts of going to work in a larger office is having the opportunity to chat with a variety of people. In 1:1 mentoring relationships, you typically meet with a large variety of people, similar to themed mentoring groups. Setting up themed mentoring for employees to celebrate their hobbies and interests is a great way for them to meet with each other socially and feel more connected to their peers. ###

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