

# Keep Them Coming Back to the Mines:

## How Peer Mentoring Keeps New Hires Safe and Coming Back to the Job

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In 2006 a large mining company in the southwestern United States was facing a challenge common to many industrial operations: booming demand for their product required many new hires and a rapid onboarding of new employees, many of them into high-danger jobs.

Because of this, the mine was experiencing a disproportionate percentage of recordable safety incidents and lost-time accidents among employees who had been less than 120 days on the job.

They also had a very high rate of attrition among new hires because people would get scared or hurt, or find the working conditions too difficult to manage on their own, and then they would quit.

The challenge: how to keep those new workers safe, get them up to full production quickly and feeling connected to their crews while stemming the new hire attrition rate.

Looking for a solution to the problem, the mine decided to pilot a program centered on a workshop called: "Peer Mentoring: A Practical Approach to Knowledge Transfer." They asked Steve Trautman, author of the workshop, and Todd Hudson, Head Maverick of the Maverick Institute, to customize and implement Peer Mentoring for workers in the mining environment.

### *Earning Respect*

Trautman and Hudson knew that before they could help the mine implement Peer Mentoring, they first had to earn the confidence and respect of the mine employees. They would begin by gaining a working knowledge of the mining business.

The Peer Mentoring team spent a couple of days within various areas of the mine, learning vocabulary and business issues. In the process, they figured out who in the mine they had to know to get things done and built personal connections to those key people.

The team also held informal focus groups representing key populations in the mine: drivers, millworkers, technicians, new employees, experienced employees and managers. In these focus groups, they explored training and onboarding issues, as well as questions such as what was it like to be a new employee, and how did they know what was safe.

### *Customizing the Workshop*

Having a strong sense of curiosity and willingness to learn the mining business helped the Peer Mentoring team customize the program in ways that were truly meaningful for the mine and its employees. One participant asked if the program had been designed from scratch for his team and another asked if the instructor had come from another mine.

Customization ranged from creating new materials and on-the-job aids that were appropriate for mine workers (such as laminated cards that were rugged enough to stand up to mine conditions) as well as using vocabulary and examples that were relevant to the workers' jobs.

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With customization complete, training began. In each full-day session, participants learned how to:

- Define their roles and responsibilities as mentors, apprentices, or managers.
- Clarify the best ways to stay in touch with each other during the busy work day.
- Break their jobs down into manageable chunks to identify what to teach.
- Create a measurable plan for transferring skills.
- Teach job content while considering apprentices' learning styles.
- Ask questions to ensure the content was actually learned.

### *An Ongoing Success with Measurable Results*

More than a year after the first meetings, Peer Mentoring has spread throughout the mine as one division after another has successfully implemented it. By this point more than 225 new employees have been brought on board using the process and results continue to pour in. The mine is also largely independent of the Peer Mentoring consultants, as internal people have taken over the program management and implementation.

Unlike many other programs of its kind, Peer Mentoring places a very strong emphasis on generating measurable results.

To measure results at the mine, two groups of new hires were tracked.

- In Group 1, the new hires went through the mine's traditional onboarding and training process, which included three days of MSHA (Mine Safety and Health Administration)-required training, then one or two days of job-specific classroom training that included safety information. After that, the new hires were each paired up with an experienced employee for traditional on-the-job training.
- In Group 2, the new hires had the same training as in Group One, except they were onboarded using Peer Mentoring techniques, and the experienced employees they were paired up with had taken Peer Mentoring training specifically focused on teaching safety awareness in addition to job skills.

After six months of tracking the two groups, data clearly showed that new hires who received typical onboarding and on-the-job training **got hurt three times more often** than the new hires on-boarded and trained by mentors who had taken the Peer Mentoring workshop. In addition, attrition and termination for Group 1 was **four times higher** than the Peer Mentored group.

### *Internal Champions Made All the Difference*

In reviewing the results for this case study, it became clear that the successful Peer Mentoring implementation had three types of internal champions:

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1. **The Global Champion.** At the mine, this person was a member of the safety department. Although she had little official authority inside the mine, her strong powers of persuasion, years of personal relationships and unflagging enthusiasm unlocked doors, overcame skepticism and kept Peer Mentoring high on everyone's priority list.
2. **The Early Adopter.** This person was a supervisor at the mine's tank house, an area where new hires typically start and one with a high rate of turnover. One of the earliest adopters of Peer Mentoring at the mine, the supervisor achieved such strong early results that he became a proponent of Peer Mentoring with supervisors in other areas. His story, when told to others at the mine, made a huge difference in getting others to adopt Peer Mentoring techniques.
3. **The Skeptic Turned Promoter.** Initially, this employee was one of the biggest and most vocal skeptics of Peer Mentoring. He had the very common fear that Peer Mentoring would require him to trash the programs and techniques he was already using. When he realized that the Peer Mentoring team would help him *incorporate* Peer Mentoring into his existing programs -- rather than *replace* them -- and when he quickly started to get great results, he became a big supporter of the program. And, because everyone knew he was initially a skeptic, when he changed his tune, others in the mine sat up and took notice.

### *Other Critical Success Factors*

During the early days of the project, the mine was going through some major changes that were competing with Peer Mentoring for managers' attention.

Because of these conditions, a key success factor of the program was that -- although management believed in the value of Peer Mentoring -- the mine's general manager didn't force the program on its managers. Instead, each area of the mine was allowed to pick its own timing. This became a critical success factor in gaining acceptance. Peer Mentoring had to prove itself through measurable results and earn their respect before they would agree to implement it.

Some managers and supervisors resisted because they were afraid that Peer Mentoring would require them to throw out what they were already doing. As it turned out, Peer Mentoring integrated perfectly into their existing programs and made them even more effective.

### *Epilogue*

Today, nearly two years after the initial workshops, the client invites the us back 2-3 times a year for follow-on training to ensure the continued quality and continuity of the program, but they are otherwise implementing the program independently.

Peer Mentoring is used in all of the divisions of the mine to provide a consistent, predictable onboarding experience for every new miner. It has also helped the mine with cross training of existing employees and to establish a pipeline of leadership candidates.

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Importantly the safety and attrition numbers that were evident after the initial implementation of Peer Mentoring have been maintained across the site. This is one program that has stood the test of time and continues to deliver a consistent return.

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The Peer Mentoring methodology is the property of Solution Strategies, Inc. The Maverick Institute is a certified and licensed Peer Mentoring partner.