

A Case Study in Mentoring

Match Displays How Both Sides Benefit from Such Pairings

By KATHLEEN MITCHELL

Janice Mazzallo calls it a “perfect match.” The executive vice president and chief human resources officer at PeoplesBank was referring to the mentoring relationship between Karen Buell and Mary Meehan, which began eight years ago, after Buell came to her and asked if she would allow Meehan to serve in that role.

Buell had completed a management-training program, participated with Meehan in strategic planning sessions, and identified her as an ideal role model.

“Mary is intelligent, polished, professional, and successful,” Buell told *BusinessWest*, adding that she wanted to follow in her footsteps.

The bank didn’t have a mentoring program of that specific type in place, but when Mazzallo presented the idea to Meehan, she readily agreed.

“I was honored to be singled out and hoped I could make a difference,” said the first vice president of commercial lending.

Since that time, Buell has had two children, com-

pleted her MBA, and been named vice president of the bank’s customer innovation lab. And she credits Meehan with playing a significant role in helping her achieve a successful life/work integration and thus accomplish all of the above.

In fact, the two women have worked so well together that last year they participated in the Bay Path University Women’s Leadership Conference, titled “Celebrating Sisterhood,” where they shared their mentoring experiences during a panel discussion.

Their experiences — on both sides of the equation — present an effective case study in the importance of mentoring and how both the mentee and mentor benefit from the experience.

Meanwhile it also shows the many roles mentors take in their work, everything from presenting what Meehan called “reality checks” to Buell — a self-described perfectionist, reluctant delegator, and professional prone to come down hard on herself — to simply acting as a reliable sounding board.

“I told her she has to let her husband or a friend help her, that having other people assist you is OK,” Meehan recalled, adding that young people face a number of challenges today, and too often they feel they must take them on alone.

Said Buell, “there are times when I set my expectations too high because I want to be able to do it all. But I can always go to Mary and run things by her, ask her if I am off base or whether I should shoot for the stars.”

For this issue and its focus on women in business,



Karen Buell (left) says her career and work/life balance have both benefited from the help of her mentor, Mary Meehan.

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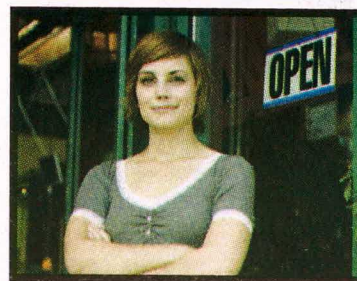
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we shine a spotlight on this relationship, which serves as a model for how mentoring can — and should — work.

Credit — Check

Buell didn't have children when this relationship began, but the difficulties of balancing her personal and professional life were already becoming apparent. And after giving birth to a son and a daughter, who are now 4 and 2, there were times when she felt overwhelmed.

But Meehan's guidance has proved invaluable, and she has urged Buell to be her own advocate when she felt it was appropriate.

For example, when Buell told her mentor she wanted to be able to pick up her son from school and work at home in the evenings to make up the time, Meehan

supported the idea, even though flex schedules were not a common practice at the bank at that time.

"I thought, if anyone could do it successfully, it was Karen," she noted, citing a long list of Buell's accomplishments.

Meehan could certainly relate to Buell's challenges and thought processes. Well, sort of.

She could relate to the part about desiring work/life balance and wanting to be with her children for important moments in their lives — or even a ride home from school every day. But not to the part about seeking — and then attaining — a flex schedule.

That's because such thoughts were mostly foreign concepts when she broke into this business.

That was in 1975, after she graduated

from college and completed a management program at Citibank. The institution didn't have a formal mentoring program in place, but she noticed that networking took place naturally among the male employees.

"The women in the training program did connect with each other, but there were only a few in the commercial lending area," she told *BusinessWest*.

A mentor might have helped her find solutions to difficult situations she encountered in her career, but she has never had one, and struggled with sacrifices she felt she needed to make during a stint at MassMutual. Meehan had a young daughter and was working in a position that required a great deal of travel, and because her peers devoted untold hours to the job and took calls on weekends, she

didn't think flexibility was an option.

But she has never forgotten the day the sacrifice of being away from home became too much. She was working in Mexico City and couldn't return home in time to take her 4-year-old daughter trick-or-treating. And although her husband planned to do it, the idea that she would miss out on an event that meant so much to her was so upsetting that she made the decision to seek a 9-to-5 job, left the insurance industry, and returned to banking.

"I never discussed my feelings with the people I worked with at MassMutual," she noted, adding that doing so was certainly not accepted practice three decades ago.

Balance Statement

Times have certainly changed, and today, mentoring is an accepted practice. As part of that practice, those being mentored are encouraged to openly discuss their feelings about what's happening with their lives and careers.

For these reasons and many others, PeoplesBank now has two mentoring ini-

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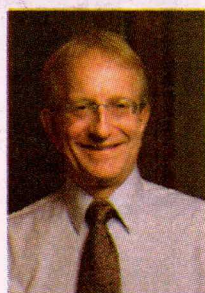
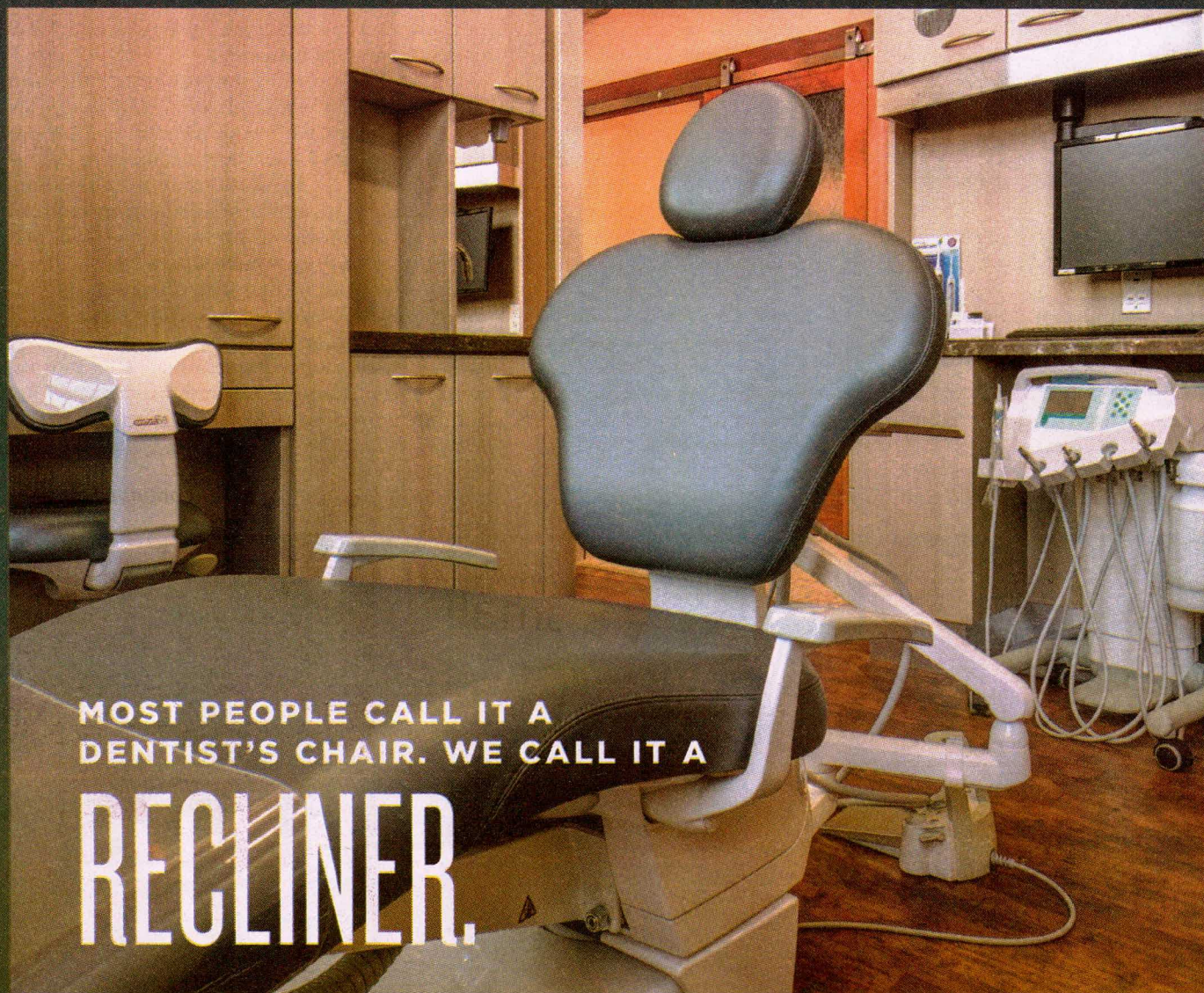
tiatives. The first is a peer-to-peer program that matches every new hire with a high-performing employee to help them acclimate to the workplace. The mentor takes the person out to lunch on their first day on the job, then continues to meet with them for six months. Matches are based on two factors — personality and the person's position at the bank — and are not gender-specific.

Mentoring was also added as an enhancement to the bank's management program. After Mazzallo reintroduced the training, and graduates indicated they felt having a mentor would be advantageous, the practice of assigning one to each participant was established.

It has been especially appropriate because Mazzallo hires two candidates each year from the UMass Isenberg School of Management. They typically have a degree in accounting or finance and spend 12 to 18 months working on special projects in different departments before advancing to a management position.

"I felt it was very important to assign these people to a mentor who could offer them support," she noted. "We have many seasoned professionals who are able and willing to help these graduates and also help internal candidates in our Leadership Development Program who have the potential to become managers."

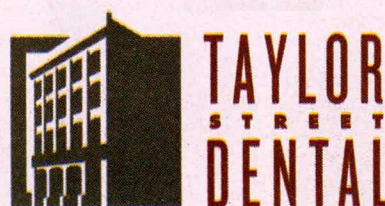
Buell told *BusinessWest* that she feels mentorship is valuable whether someone



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Certifications

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together can be even more time-consuming and challenging.

You don't have to be going through the application process before you get organized. If you think that getting certified is something that you will eventually want to do, it is wise to start putting aside the necessary documents and paperwork as early as possible.

The Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC), a national, Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that also provides an avenue for women-owned enterprises to get certified, has a

list of required documentation on their website.

Here is typically what to expect in the certification process:

- The applicant sends the completed application to the certifying agency;
- The certifier checks to ensure that the application is complete with supporting documentation;
- The application is forwarded to one of the national review committees;
- If the committee has questions arising from the documentation in your application, they will contact you for clarification;
- A visit to your place of business will be arranged and conducted by one of the certifier's trained site visitors. Results of the site visit are sent to the review com-

mittee;

- The review committee meets again to make final decision;
- The applicant is notified of the decision, and, if certified, a certification packet is sent. If the application has been denied certification, a letter is sent stating the reasons and stating the appeal process; and
- You must renew your company's certification annually, whether you have WBE, WOSB, or EDWOSB certification. However, the process is a relatively simple one after the initial certification, especially if there have been no ownership changes.

Once you make it through the certification process, it's time to use the distinction to your advantage. According to

business owners who have their certification, there is a lot of potential to grow your business through this avenue, but you can't just sit back and expect the business to come to you. The best way to get word out that you are certified is to contact local, state, and national certification agencies and ask to get put on their mailing list.

Additionally, mention that you are a certified women-owned enterprise on your marketing and promotional materials, which is an easy way to let potential customers know about this important distinction. ■

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Mentoring

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is just beginning their career or facing new challenges.

"If your company doesn't have a program, you should ask for one. It amounts to self-help and is well worth it," she said. "Mary has given me many nuggets of wisdom and helped me get a better perspective on things, as she is able to look through a different lens."

"And although younger people don't always take the time to look for a mentor, there is something to be said for life experiences that you just can't Google," she went on. "We are all very busy, but it's important to have someone who can just sit down and listen."

Buell acknowledged that approaching a person in a high position and requesting help can be uncomfortable.

"But if someone can see the value, they may be more apt to take a stance," she said, citing her own success as an example.

"It has made a world of difference to have someone further down the road who I can talk to, and I produce more for the bank because of this relationship. It's been life-changing and has helped me identify my strengths, be less critical of myself, and be better able to acknowledge my accomplishments."

Meehan has also found it rewarding. "When you give of yourself, you get a lot back," she explained. "I have had a lot of pleasure watching Karen grow, and someday, when I look back on my career, being a mentor will definitely be one of the highlights. It has been a very nice experience, and we have become friends."

Change Agents

Friendship would be considered a bonus — an industry term of sorts — when it comes to such relationships, but they are commonplace.

And they are just one of many rewards to be garnered by those on both sides of mentoring, which, as this model shows, brings benefits for the participants, the company, and its customers.

That would make this a win-win-win situation, an eventuality that brings value in a number of ways. ■

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