

# **An Action Research on Mentoring Programs Situated in Affirmative Action Initiatives: A Case of a Leading Brewery Company in Japan**

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## **Abstract**

Mentoring can be an effective strategy in improving retention and facilitating promotion of female employees. An action research was conducted for improving the effectiveness of mentoring programs situated in affirmative action initiatives, which have been implemented in a Japan's leading brewery company. The main objectives of the mentoring program targeted in this research is to support the career development of female employees, in short-term, 1) enabling female employees to have role models and advisors around themselves, 2) providing support for the formation of career vision of female employees and their continuous employment, whereas in long-term, 3) lowering the turnover rate among female employees, and 4) creating a mentoring chain inside the company. Through a series of program evaluations, following outcomes were tentatively identified: 1) female employees' motivation to engage in management increased, 2) turnover rate among career-track female employees declined, and 3) mentoring chain seemed to be created in the company. The article suggests that further formative and outcome evaluation is needed for scrutinizing the genuine effectiveness of the program.

## **Keyword**

Mentoring Program, Affirmative Action, Career Development, Program Evaluation,  
Female Employees

## **Background**

Mentoring program has been recognized as a valuable development strategy and an affirmative action practices that can be used to support and promote women which have been viewed as previously disadvantaged (Girves, Zepeda, and Gwathmey, 2005; Watanabe and Sano, 2021).

The Kirin Group has long engaged in affirmative action as one of its management challenges. Kirin Affirmative Action Initiatives (announced in October 2006) declares as follows: “Transforming the corporate culture into one, where various human resources express their opinions and play active roles, will increase corporate competitiveness, and lead to the realization of the Kirin Group's long-term management strategy. From that perspective, it is essential for the Kirin Group to establish an

environment where its employees, and particularly female employees as the first step, exercise initiative and creativity to actively engage in work.”

Behind this declaration lay the following situation surrounding the female employees of Kirin. First, from around the fifth year in the company, the turnover rate of female employees increased rapidly. Nearly half of female employees resigned within five years of being hired. Second, the ratio of female managers was extremely low at 1.7%.

Given such a situation, Kirin decided to promote involvement by women as the first step of diversity promotion. The Network for the Promotion of Involvement by Women which aims to positively support involvement by female employees conducted a present state analysis, from which the following elements were drawn as concrete issues: 1) issues with regard to the ways of working of female employees and their career awareness (uncertain future, absence of advisors, absence of role models around female employees, low inclination toward managerial positions); 2) issues with regard to the system of and support for work-life balance; and 3) issues with regard to management and organizational culture surrounding female employees.

Kirin Mentoring Program was introduced as a measure to respond to the issues described in 1) above. However, although it was decided to launch the mentoring program, the company lacked internal resources to design the program. Kirin therefore gained the cooperation of outside experts to design a program that is consistent with its aims. The author’s team was consequently designated as the outside experts due to a lot of experiences of starting up and monitoring various mentoring programs (Watanabe and Watanabe, 2019; Watanabe, Watanabe and Imai, 2020).

### **Aims of Kirin Mentoring Program**

Kirin Mentoring Program is designed to support the career development of female employees. Based on the results of the above-mentioned present state analysis, the company established short-term goals of 1) enabling women to have role models and advisors around themselves, and 2) providing support for the formation of career vision of female employees and their continuous employment (professional, psychological and career-related support), and long-term goals of 3) lowering through the above means the turnover rate among female employees who have been employed with the company for five years or more, and providing mental support to female managers to cultivate their motivation to engage in higher-level management, and 4) creating a mentoring chain inside the company.

### **Target Participants of Kirin Mentoring Program**

Protégés(Mentees):

Of the approximately 1,000 female employees, managers and career-track female employees who were

in their fourth year of hire or more were identified as the first protégé candidates. Ten female managers and 30 female managers were selected as protégés in the first and second step, respectively, and in the third step 70 applicants were identified as protégés out of all the career-track female employees.

Mentors:

Executive officers (males) or female managers who had already been protégés were identified as mentor candidates. Five executive officers were selected as mentors in the first step, while 5 executive officers and 10 female managers who had already been protégés were selected as mentors in the second step. Likewise, during the third step, 40 female managers who had already been protégés became mentors.

### Characteristics of Kirin Mentoring Program

Kirin Mentoring Program was conducted largely in line with three steps.

Step 1 was positioned as an experimental stage. During Step 2, the program was revised based on the knowledge gained in Step 1, and the company moved the mentoring program into full gear by setting new mentor-protégé pairs. At the same time, by carrying out a program where those who were protégés in Step 1 became mentors, it served as an experimental approach to seeking multilayered support through mentoring (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

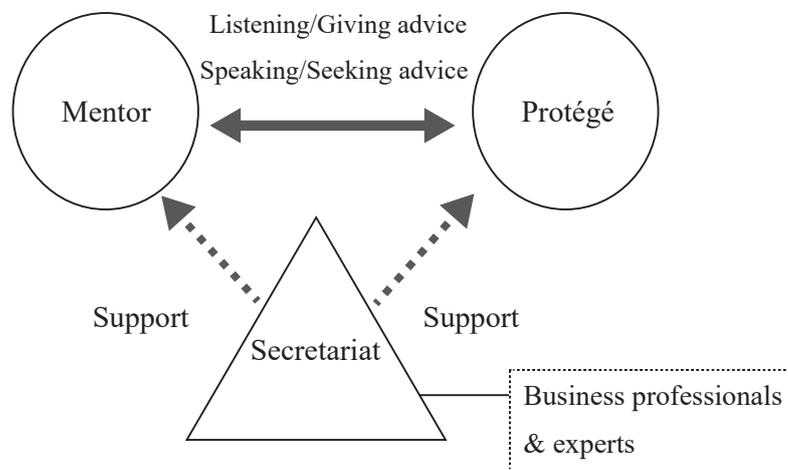


Figure 1. Whole Image of Kirin Mentoring Program

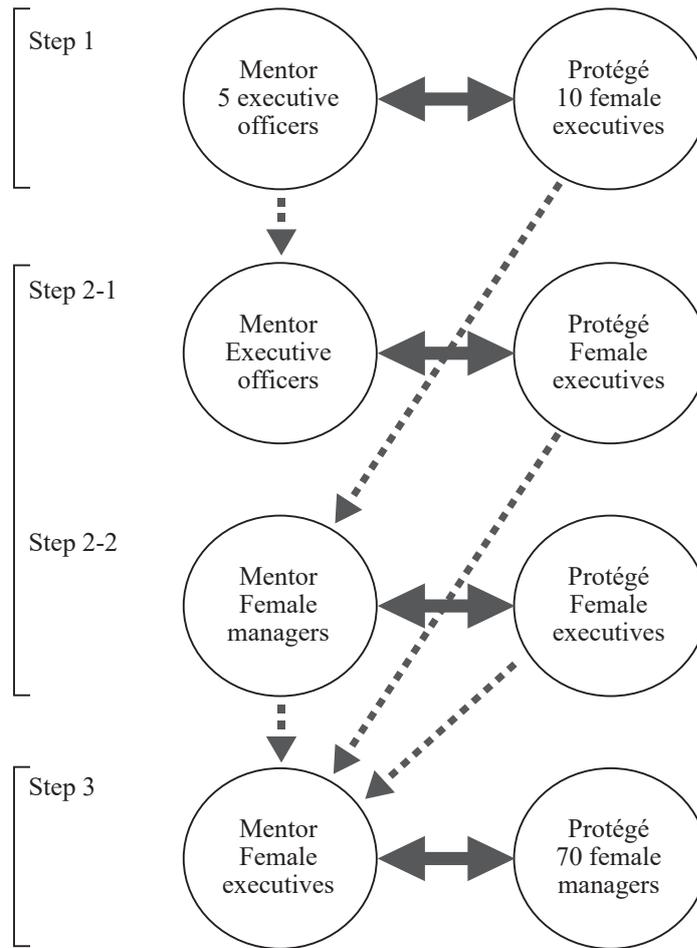


Figure 2. Steps of Kirin Mentoring Program

The selection of mentors and the matching of mentors and protégés were handled by the mentoring secretariat working in coordination with those responsible for personnel affairs. Mentor-protégé pairs were decided by confirming that there is and there has been no superior-subordinate relationship between each pair. There was no compensation, allowance or other payment for participating in the mentoring program.

### Execution of the Mentoring Program

Prior to executing the mentoring program, a “briefing session” was held for mentors and protégés. The briefing session included the explanation of the overview of the program and its aims, lectures on mentoring, introduction of communication techniques, and case discussions.

Following the briefing session, regular communication was carried out between the mentor and protégé in a continuous manner. The mentoring period was six months for Step 1 and 2, and one year for Step 3. As a rule, mentoring was to be conducted face-to-face on a one-on-one basis, but in case it was impossible to meet with each other due to work-related reasons, the participants were able to use other

means such as e-mail and telephone. The frequency of communication was “at least once a month,” and regular and continuous communication was recommended.

### **Evaluation of the Program**

For the evaluation of the program, the secretariat required the participants to submit a monitoring sheet (submitted by the mentor and protégé separately once a month or so, in order to maintain a good relationship between each pair), conducted a questionnaire survey after the completion of the program (to collect feedback, topics, opinions and requests regarding mentoring), and conducted a thank-you party for the participants (participated in by the secretariat staff, mentors and protégés). By using the information obtained from these three approaches in a comprehensive manner, the secretariat evaluated the execution process as well as the attitude of protégés.

As a result of the process evaluation, it became clear that the execution process of the mentoring program was largely in line with the plan, from design to the orientation, the matching of mentors and protégés, the execution of mentoring and monitoring. In addition, protégés reported that by participating in the mentoring program there had been improvement in the following areas: 1) understanding mentoring and obtaining knowledge about training details; 2) obtaining a high level of satisfaction with the mentoring program and the relationship with mentors; 3) obtaining opportunities to newly recognize their own roles and look back on their careers; 4) feeling that psychological support is provided for the vague anxiety they feel about their future; and 5) having the awareness that they are going to become “mentors” for their juniors in the near future; and thus it was confirmed that positive outcomes were obtained with regard to the objectives of the program.

At the same time, several issues also surfaced from the execution of the program. The first issue was the insufficient number of participants. The first step was conducted with 10 pairs as planned. In the second step, however, 30 pairs were originally planned to participate in the program, but in actuality it was carried out with only 20 pairs. This would affect the third step to be followed because in the third step onward they were considering employing a method where employees would apply to become participants. Sufficient consideration was necessary as to if they should switch to such a method under this situation.

The second issue was the frequency of communication. It was recommended to have regular and continuous communication “at least once a month,” but the pair that met with least frequency only met on two occasions. This was due to a structural separation that made it “impossible to find time as they were both transferred to new divisions.” For other pairs that did not meet often, the most prevalent reason was that they were too busy with daily work. In addition, not only the mentors but also the protégés felt a psychological burden. It seemed as if the more devotedly and eagerly the mentor was

involved, the more mental burden the protégé would feel, as can be seen in feedback such as “I felt sorry for taking the time of an executive officer,” and “when I talked about work, I was more concerned about his response to it.”

The third issue was the lack of understanding of the mentoring program and the ambiguity of its roles. Some participants were uncomfortable with the program and expressed opinions such as “I feel this is mandatory,” and “I want the aims to be clarified.” Participants were not the only ones who experienced this issue. There were opinions such as “the mentoring program is not known to everyone in the company,” and “some people consider it as an exclusive privilege of women.” Such reactions from members who did not participate in the program also perplexed the participants. However, the details of how direct supervisors would be involved in the mentoring program were not clarified in concrete terms.

### **Outcome Evaluation of Kirin Mentoring Program**

Although the program still continues today, the following results had been obtained as of 2009. As these results reflect the various measures to promote involvement by women, including the mentoring program, it is necessary to consider that it cannot be said with absolute certainty that these are genuinely the effects of only the mentoring program (Watanabe, 2018; Yasuda and Watanabe, 2008)..

Increased motivation to engage in management:

Seventy percent of female employees responded that they “feel that the company is more prepared to support them than three years ago,” and 84% of all employees, male and female, commented that they “think that it is important to support involvement by women.” As can be seen from such responses, the change in the employees’ awareness was evident, and the number of female managers has increased to 57 (as of March 2009). This is double the figure compared with prior to the Affirmative Action Declaration (January 2006). The ratio of female managers to all managers has also increased from 1.5% (January 2006) to 3% (as of March 2009).

Lower turnover rate among career-track female employees (employed with the company for five years or more):

The turnover rate of career-track female employees within five years of being hired decreased by half compared with the same rate in 2006. Furthermore, the number of those who resigned voluntarily in 2009 decreased to one third the average figure between 2006 and 2008.

Creation of a mentoring chain in the company: Many of those who experienced mentoring gained a number of insights from it. As the number of people who experienced mentoring increases, so does the number of those who understand and support involvement by women in the company. In addition, the circle of mentoring is expanding as can be seen in cases where female managers who became mentors in the third step seek advice from their mentors in the first step when they have difficulty giving advice

to their protégés, as well as cases where mentors discuss among themselves how to support the careers of their juniors.

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## Note

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