

Interview - Sam Toppenberg, Group Executive, People and Capability at Ventia Pty Ltd January 2021 by Dana Juburi, Research Analyst at Sinclair Dorman

Sam Toppenberg is an HR executive at Ventia Pty Ltd; one of the largest essential services providers for infrastructure in Australia and New Zealand. We sat down for a virtual chat to discuss the power of mentoring in boosting connectivity in the workforce and adapting to a post-covid workplace.

It must be a huge responsibility to be a people director of over 30,000 employees. What is that like?

It's something that I think about all the time. People rely on me to make sure that they are paid, safe, cared for, and have meaningful work to do. The challenge that comes with being a people director is that you can make it too much about the people and not enough about the commercial, or too much about the commercial and not enough about the people. It's a fine line.

We seem to believe that large corporations consist of employees that feel insignificant and isolated. To what extent do you agree with this?

The reality is that I will never meet the 30,000 people that I work with. But where you have the ability to influence, is if you can build in mechanisms that ensure there is good teaming at the local level.

Does your organization use mentoring to boost connectivity in the workforce?

We traditionally do mentoring for graduates but this year we will be expanding that for our female employees to highlight our female talent and make it stand out. In my own career, I've had a series of mentors that have come in and out of my life as I needed them. I would like to create a similar experience at Ventia, where there are different people you can approach for different types of advice. Technology has made mentoring a whole lot easier now.

What are your organisation's incentives for using mentoring?

The corporation's incentive is to improve employee engagement because an engaged employee is more productive and fulfilled than an unengaged employee. I like it because I think it creates a safety net around an employee, so if something is wrong there will be another point of contact to make sure they are okay. What I've found, particularly when working with the graduates, is that they teach me as much as I teach them. I think the gap between the generations at the moment is pretty large, and mentoring is helping to bridge that gap.

How do you think mentoring can help people and organizations to adapt to a post-covid workplace?

I think mentoring provides someone to help you manage change. If a mentor can support you with that and help you react to it, then these events become less stressful. I don't see mentoring as a soft cushion but rather a support system that might sometimes be in the form of tough love.

Sam Toppenberg has inspired us to organize a mentoring round table for HR directors on the 26th of January at 12pm (UK time) in the form of a 30 minute zoom call. This is an opportunity for HR peers to share different ideas on mentoring, connectivity and adaptability in a post-covid workplace. If you would be interested in joining us, please let us know at kerrie@sinclairdorman.com.