

executive coach
by Karlin Sloan



The mensch in the trench

Learning from the good guys in the organization.

Mensch (also *mentsch*, *mentsh*, *mesh* or *mench*) is a German noun meaning a “human.” In Yiddish (from which the word has migrated into American English), *mensch* roughly means “a good person.” A *mensch* is a particularly good person, with the qualities one would hope for in a dear friend or trusted colleague.

A CONSULTANT ON MY TEAM, STEVE GOLDBERG, was working with a client and discovered an important theme in the client’s organization. The best and brightest contributors were not always asked for their input or feedback at opportune times, and they were starting to feel disconnected from the organization. In Steve’s mind, there had to be a better way, so he came up with an idea he called “The Mensch in the Trench.”

The Mensch in the Trench is a special leader or contributor who reflects the

values of the organization. He or she is trustworthy and good to be around, and has a great sense of what is right in a given situation. Typically, *mensches* think about others and about the organization, not just themselves. They are a critical part of the pulse of an organiza-



tion, and they hold great information about what works and what the company can leverage to grow and develop.

Goldberg developed a technique to identify the *mensches* in the organization and interview them. The first step is to find the unsung heroes. Who is trusted by the executive team? Who has *mensch*-like qualities?

What’s the difference between a traditional assessment and a *mensch* interview? The *mensch* interview is an acknowledgement of someone’s contribution. The interview itself helps your *mensches* to feel valued and to know they can make a difference.

Research shows that financial rewards are not the be-all and end-all. People want to be both valued and valuable. The *mensch* interview allows them to be just that.

One of the *mensches* has this to say about the process: “I’m excited to have a thinking partner, to incubate

new ideas, and to start thinking about new projects and not just my day-to-day work. ... I feel like this is an opportunity for me to put in my two cents without having to struggle through a large meeting in which everyone is talking over one another. Having focused time to talk about things that are important to me is amazing.”

A typical Mensch in the Trench interview can include these questions:

- Describe a high-point experience in your organization or team; a time when you were most alive and engaged.
- Without being modest, what is it that you value most about yourself, your work and your organization?
- What are the core factors that give life to your organization, without which the organization would cease to exist?
- What do you want out of this organization? How can we help to keep you engaged, alive and vital in your work life?
- What three wishes do you now have to enhance the health and vitality of your organization/team?*

What have the results been? For one, the top-tier players in the organization feel valued and leveraged. The workforce is more engaged, and loyalty is created where there was none. Another great result? Big ideas surface to make the organization better, more efficient and more flexible in the face of change. Those ideas used to be complaints about what the company wasn’t doing, and they are now on the docket as initiatives to be executed.

What does Goldberg have to say about this process of finding the *mensches* among us? “I’m so privileged to do this work. I get to be in the presence of people who are really dedicated, committed and excited about growth and development. My clients feel honored to be part of these programs, because they know how important they are to their companies.”

Here’s to the very valuable Mensch in the Trench in your organization! 🍀

KARLIN SLOAN, MA., is founder and president of Karlin Sloan & Co. (www.karlinsloan.com), based in New York City and Chicago, which provides executive coaching, team building and leadership development.

* Questions excerpted from *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* by David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney and Jaqueline Stavros (Berrett Koehler, 2003).