

Intra-organizational Mentorship Revisited

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At a time when the workforce has never been more diverse, short-term assignments, virtual organizations, the gig economy, flat hierarchies, and “#metoo” make it more difficult to find mentors. Employees can find themselves shut out of success as they make fundamental mistakes. Grounding in topics like ethics, values, personal image, and interpersonal dynamics is lost. This paper explores research on mentorship and when the mentor and protégé connect across diversity attributes. The mentor may even place the needs of the protégé above the needs of the firm. This paper finally proposes some issues that disrupt the development of mentoring relationships.

Keywords: mentoring, mentorship

INTRODUCTION

Of all the dyadic relationships in organizations, one of the most important yet under-studied (Bortnowska and Seiler, 2019) is the relationship formed between mentors and proteges. Mentors are more senior individuals involved in a "unique relationship" (Godshalk and Sosik, 2007) with a typically junior person within the mentor's network (Payne and Huffman, 2005). Typically, but not always, that protégé is in the same organization as the mentor but that organization can be defined as a place of employment, association or even alumnae/interest group.

Mentoring is defined as a time-intensive (Allen, Eby and Lentz, 2006; Weinberg and Lankau, 2011) and multi-step process of coaching, development, and friendship (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007) which facilitates the transfer of new knowledge often of a technical or methodological nature (Atkins, 2019). Mentoring provides support for the protégé early in the protégé career; expedites progression for the protégé on the job and during their career; and improves job performance (Chandler, Kram and Yip, 2011). In addition to allowing the protégé to learn and mirror appropriate behaviors (Campbell, 2007; Gibson, 2004) increasing organizational identification for the protégé (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997 and Thomas, 1989), the mentoring relationship can have significant benefits for the mentor as well (Jones, 2019).

The concept of mentorship is one of a relationship that provides the opportunity to form a deeply personal connection between two individuals in a professional setting that speeds the transfer of firm-specific knowledge (Taylor and Curtis, 2018) and more general business success strategies (Chen 2016). Firms have been formally assigning new key employees to mentoring relationships for these very reasons since at least the 1950s (Stolz, 1966) despite the little formal study of firm outcomes (Taylor and Curtis, 2018). When these relationships are very successful both parties benefit from the exchange of knowledge (Humberd and Rouse, 2016).

Despite the value of the relationships for both parts of the dyad and the organization, systematic study of the phenomenon and the outcomes for any parties has been limited. Bortnowska and Seiler (2019) found only five empirical studies on the outcomes of mentoring, along with three other theoretical or review papers. This validates the work of Eby, Durley, Evans, and Ragins (2008) who found a few empirical papers with a lack of papers focused on outcomes. There is high-quality research on the antecedents of mentorship and in defining the theoretical nature of the relationships. This paper attempts to propose ways to close important gaps in the literature. First, this paper explores the nature of the modern workplace disruptions to the trust-based model at the core of the mentorship dyad (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Freitag and Tranmueller, 2009 and Herko and Koulloukian, 2017). Second, this paper explores the nature of the modern workplace that disrupts the traditional models of mentorship (Kram 1983, 1985; Pegg, 1999; and Zachary, 2000).

The rest of this paper is organized in the following way; the paper will explore the literature on the nature of the mentoring relationship and its foundations in trust. The paper will then offer up two very different types of mentoring, intra-organizational mentoring focused on firm-specific knowledge and integration of the protégé and relational mentoring (Ragins, 2012) focused on a deep connection within the dyad that extends for years and transcends organizational boundaries. The paper will finish with a discussion of the changing nature of the mentor, which informs our decisions on the sample for testing of these propositions.

Literature Review and Proposition Development

One of the oldest papers on the topic of mentoring discusses the need for executives to take a step back and transfer “the responsibility for progress to his juniors, retaining for himself the role of counsel and critic’ (Moore, 1939: 93). The context is the foundation of US manufacturing companies in New England in the early 1800s. Moore detailed the needs of founders and executives to eschew the psychological need to maintain control and instead train the next generation for leadership. Moore, in analyzing the infancy of US manufacturing, has hit on three essential elements of mentorship that resonate into this digital age; providing a close personal relationship outside the normal channels (Moore’s counsel role) and providing the protégé with developmental and learning opportunities (Moore’s critic role) and providing responsibility opportunities, as through delegation; which requires trust within the mentoring relationship.

Mentorship is not synonymous with leadership and mentoring relationships do not naturally overlap the leader-subordinate relationship (Godshalk and Sosik, 2007). The ideal mentorship dyad has learning running both ways (Jones, 2019) which may not be ideal for leader-member relationships (Godshalk and Sosik, 2007). That is there is knowledge transfer from the mentor to protégé but also from protégé to mentor. Useful mentors have extensive industry and business experience. They have a strong network of connections that they readily share with their protégés and they assist with both the development of the protégé’s career-skills and careers (Humberd and Rouse, 2016). Protégés can transfer new knowledge to the mentor as well in the form of business practices from outside the firm or technical skills gained in training programs, college or graduate programs, which can be more difficult in supervisor-subordinate dyads. The need to have a relationship that transcends organizational boundaries led Stolz (1966) to argue that executive development is easier in larger organizations. As mentoring relationships can shorten the path to success in a particular job or a particular organization, having potential mentors, not in supervisory capacities allows for alignment of organizational goals and the development of informal communication channels. These informal communication channels can be critical for organizations

gathering information about employee perceptions at all levels of the organization (Taylor and Curtis, 2018). Having more potential mentors with a variety of demographic and cognitive profiles allows for better matching dyads (Jones, 2019).

Mentorship is not synonymous with training; however, there is a clear developmental aspect to the mentoring relationship in which the mentor modified behavior in positive ways (for the organization and the career path of the protégé). Argyris and Schon (1996) define growth for the protégé as increasing the person's capacity, which is generating new knowledge that is internalized. The mentor needs to provide information to the protégé that is difficult to acquire by other channels for the relationship to be successful. This can take the form of single-loop learning, developing the ability to perform tasks as a matter of routine (firm-specific knowledge such as navigating an organization's travel reimbursement policies or annual review process). More importantly for the protégé, it can take the form of double-loop learning (Yeo, 2006) wherein the protégé is challenged to learn through discourse and reflection and the protégé integrates new knowledge that impacts their daily activities and thought processes.

Mentoring and Trust

Mentoring may not be synonymous with trust, but trust is the essential antecedent for the relationship to form. While Schoorman, Mayer and Davis (2007) expressed trust in terms of the positive confidence one party has that the other party will perform as expected. Herko and Kouloukian (2017) identified three aspects of trust which promote positive relationships; competence-based trust, based on demonstrated past performance that can be projected forward; integrity-based trust, based on a demonstrated correlation between promises made and delivered; and gut-level trust, the perceptions of trust-worthiness upon initial interactions. Eby and McManus (2004) argued lack of trust impaired mentorship.

Rosseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998) defined trust in terms of making oneself vulnerable. The protégé must be prepared to surrender some level of control of their career to the mentor. Work, at least initially, through the mentor's processes and the mentor's network. Lavenson (1972) in the aptly titled "Helluva way to learn salesmanship" relates the story of an organization that would put new sales executives at the total mercy of experienced regional and local salesmen. Any complaint by the new sales executive would result in immediate termination for the new executive. While an extreme example, protégés still must trust the mentor to exercise good judgment. At the same time, mentors are making themselves vulnerable. Mentors desire high performers as protégés (Allen, Poteet and Russell, 2000) as the mentor's ability to groom talent is part of their value to the organization. A mismatched or poor performing protégé can harm the mentor.

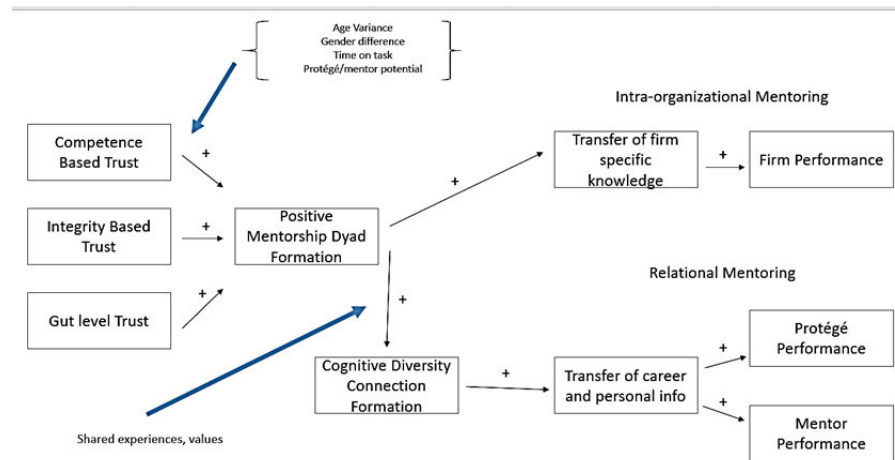
As such, we propose:

PIA: Competence-based trust is positively associated with positive mentorship dyad formation.

PIB: Integrity-based trust is positively associated with positive mentorship dyad formation.

PIC: Gut-level trust is positively associated with positive mentorship dyad formation.

**FIGURE 1
THE MODEL**



Mediation of Formation of the Mentoring Relationship

Obstacles to forming trust and then a mentoring relationship create complications for organizations and those in the potential dyad. As mentioned, perceptions of potential from either member of the dyad may impact the ability of the relationship to form. Demographic diversity can also impact the ability of the dyad to begin the transformation to a mentoring relationship. Writer Frank Herbert (1965) relates a proverb, “a beginning is a very delicate time” which captures the difficulties faced when any new professional relationship begins. These difficulties can often spring from demographic differences between the mentor and protégé. Workplaces are diverse concerning race, gender, and age. Which can lead to mentors withholding information from protégés (Jones, 2019).

P2A: *Demographic diversity mediates the relationship between the trust antecedents and positive mentorship dyad formation.*

Time can have two impacts on the relationship. First is the difference in time with the organization. Pfeffer (1983) found that controlled for all other aspects of diversity, board members who came to an organization at the same time were more likely to form close interpersonal bonds than board members who joined the organizations at different times. The shared experiences of joining the organization at the same time were powerful and resilient in shaping their viewpoints. By definition, the mentor/protégé dyad will have employees joining the organization at very different points, perhaps decades apart.

P2B: *Years of experience with the organization mediates the relationship between the trust antecedents and positive mentorship dyad formation.*

Time on task impacts learning relationships of all sorts (Foster and Rahinel, 2008) and mentoring is no different. The amount of time the mentor and protégé spend together allows for the growth and development of the relationship. Chen (2006) cites aspects of this time on task including, long-term communication, frequent interaction, face-to-face meetings and substantive interaction on job specifics. Weinberg and Lankau (2011) considered mentor time commitment a critical component to developing the relationship.

P2C: *The amount of time the mentor and protégé spend together mediates the relationship between the trust antecedents and positive mentorship dyad formation.*

Intra-organizational Mentoring

Ragins (2012) divided mentoring relationships by the quality of the interaction. The research divided the mentoring relationships into what we are terming dysfunctional, intra-organizational and relational. Dysfunctional mentoring relationships would be failures to connect on one of the trust antecedents, as discussed earlier in the paper. Relational mentoring relationships are reserved for later in the paper.

Focusing on the intra-organizational relationships, that is mentoring dyads that form and successfully transfer knowledge between the mentor and the protégé; the benefits accrue to all parties including the organization. Here the expectation that at least single-loop learning (Atkins, 2019) is taking place within the relationship and there is a transfer of firm-specific knowledge between the mentor and protégé. Task-based learning with immediate returns for the protégé in localized knowledge that would include "last-mile training" (training on job specifics not provided by vocational, certification or educational services) and industry-specific information. As a result, we propose:

P3: Positive mentorship dyad formation has a positive impact on the transfer of firm-specific knowledge.

Organizations have been relying on informal and formal mentoring systems with little research support as to the value of these plans to the success of firms. Taylor and Curtis (2018) have pointed out there is little empirical support for the impact on firm performance. Eby, et al (2008) have argued there are just too few studies that attempt to link mentoring and firm performance. There has been some empirical work on entrepreneurial firm performance and the mentoring of founders. Deakins, Graham, Sullivan, and Whittam (2007) have found that the higher failure rate of entrepreneurial firms can be mitigated through founder mentoring. Likewise, Hansford, Tennent, and Ehrich (2002) found that poor mentoring was a contributing factor in entrepreneurial firms underperforming.

With minimal evidence of positive contribution to firm performance, why would firms continue to enact formal mentoring programs and expend the effort? Research has identified several positive organizational outcomes. Taylor and Curtis (2018) identified a series of benefits to firms from mentoring including reducing turnover intentions, increasing organizational commitment, improved organizational communication, reductions in ethical stress and a reduction in unethical behavior.

In attempting to tie these benefits to firm performance and having so little academic research to consider, we turn to professional sources. A white paper from the Center for American Progress offers the following data in attempting to calculate the cost of turnover to organizations. They calculated that a high turnover/low-paying position (the hourly employee) costs just over \$3,300 to replace; a mid-range employee would cost approximately \$8,000 and the cost for a highly educated position could be as high as \$213,000 (Boushey and Glynn, 2012). These costs include search, recruiting, training and lost productivity are based on thirty case studies.

The Josephson Ethics Institute published a white paper on the costs of unethical behavior and had the following findings:

- US firms lose \$600B (US) per year to fraud of all kinds
- Already costs US firms more than consumer fraud and is growing
- Negative impact on sales as 80% of people consider the perception of the firm's ethics
- Negative impact on stock price as 74% of people consider the perception of the firm's honesty
- Lowers productivity by lowering trust, morale and raising stress
- Worsens communication, in general, and lowers unethical behavior reporting
- Negative impact on retention and recruiting.

One of the critical findings in the report was that 58% of workers believed that unethical behaviors would decrease if managers modeled proper ethical behaviors (Josephson, 2017).

Given this, we propose:

P4: The transfer of firm-specific knowledge within positive mentorship dyads has a positive impact on firm performance.

Relational Mentoring

In the original concept of the paper, this was supposed to be the final proposition that we envisioned testing in subsequent research. However, our research led us to explore two other topics. Ragins (2012) spoke of three levels of mentoring relationships, what we referred to as dysfunctional, intra-organizational and relational. Other authors relate multi-step and multi-year mentorships that result in high levels of not only job but also career success. How do these relational mentorships form? Do they result in additional benefits for the parties to the dyad and the organization?

In thinking about how these relationships form and grow, we have to return to two concepts we discussed earlier, diversity and time. Demographic diversity can be a critical component in the formation of relationships including mentoring relationships (Jackson, May and Whitney, 1995) and Jones (2019) found that workers would be less likely to trust and share knowledge with workers that were different from them. Another aspect of diversity, however, is cognitive diversity. Cognitive diversity, defined as the commonality or difference in hidden or sub-surface attributes such as values, experiences, and backgrounds (Jackson, et al., 2005; Finkelstein, Hambrick and Cannella, 2009; Tsui and Gutek, 1999; Goodstein, Guatam and Boeker, 1994; Zanoni, 2010), may be critical in forming close personal connections. These differences or commonalities only surface through time. Some may be surface quickly (University, fraternity/sorority, a common love/hate for the Dallas Cowboys) others though may take time and heightened trust to surface (religious affiliation, political affiliation/activity or veteran status). This cognitive commonality between the mentor and protégé would make identification with the mentor more likely (Ruigrok, Peck and Keller, 2006). The relationship in the dyad would deepen and achieve a higher relationship status (Kram, 1983, 1985).

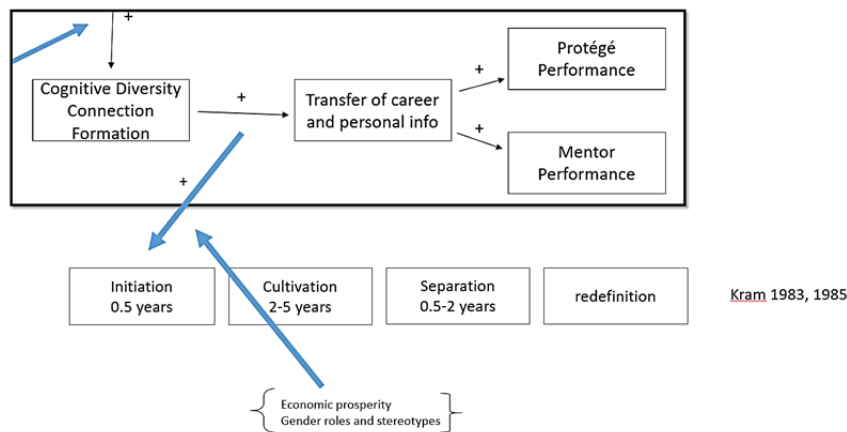
While there are several papers (Pegg, 1999; Zachary, 2000; Allen, et al, 2009 and Bortnowksa and Seiler, 2019) that have added to the original model proposed by Kram (1983, 1985), the basic proposal holds. The process of relational mentorship begins with an initial period that would last from six months to a year. The mentor would then cultivate the protégé for additional responsibility through additional developmental opportunities and challenges over the next two to five years. Importantly, Kram and others envision a period of separation as a critical stage in the mentorship process. A period of organizational distance or organizational separation as suggested by Kram (1983, 1985) could include the protégé leaving the organization. Chen (2016) argues this is a necessary step as well, suggesting one of the roles of the mentor is integrating the protégé into professional networks. This separation period would suggest that as the relationship deepens and grows, mentorship outcomes supersede or crowd out organizational outcomes. Chen (2016) articulates the types of interactions that would take place during this separation stage to deepen and continue the relationship between the mentor and protégé, she includes frequent communication along several channels (email, Skype and face-to-face at conferences; interaction with job-based or career-based activities, discussion of professional norms and articulation of unspoken rules of the profession. Kram (1983, 1985) then envisions a further development as the mentoring relationship changes to one of friendship and therefore:

***P5A:** Low levels of cognitive diversity has a positive relationship with the transfer of career and personal development.*

***P5B:** The transfer of career and personal development captured in relational mentorships has a positive relationship with protégé outcomes.*

***P5C:** The transfer of career and personal development captured in relational mentorships has a positive relationship with mentor outcomes.*

FIGURE 2
THE MODEL FOR RELATIONATL MENTORING



Mediation of Formation of Relational Mentorships

The richer dyad formation that results from successful mentorships coupled with low levels of cognitive diversity can yield relational mentoring relationships; however, some issues may prevent their development. The first of these issues is the persistent difficulties around gender politics in the workplace, especially as we remember the dyad often involves senior members and junior (or even entry-level) members. Smith and Johnson (2017) discuss the lingering biases men may have about women’s capacities, the ability for women to respond to challenges, the adherence to antiquated gender roles. Enshler and Murphy (2011) found that women in the role of protégé experienced higher rates of dissatisfaction with male mentors. The authors felt this was a result of female protégés experiencing a significantly higher level of relational challenges. As such, we propose the following relationship:

P6A: *Gender diversity mediates the relationship between relational mentorship formation and the transfer of career and personal information.*

The next issue we should consider is whether the high-quality protégés that mentors desire (Allen, et al, 2000) will demonstrate the patience and discipline necessary to benefit from mentors. Chandler, et al (2011) argue that mentoring speeds the process of job and career development. Changes to the workplace and economy have placed a premium on technical and analytic skills that are easily transferrable across companies and industries. This has resulted in phenomenon such as the "gig" economy (wherein highly skilled workers earn compensation on a project-by-project basis); ghosting (wherein highly skilled workers job hop across industries); and entrepreneurial ventures launched by increasing young workers (essentially very highly skilled workers who never enter traditional workplaces, including Mark Zuckerberg and Michael Dell). These opportunities are more viable during periods of economic prosperity when the consequences of failure and return to more traditional work roles. From the perception of the protégé, an eight-year wait to fully realize the benefits of the relationship may not be desirable, therefore we propose:

P6B: *Economic prosperity mediates the relationship between relational mentorship formation and the transfer of career and personal information.*

Implications

In the testing of these propositions, we have developed several ideas about how mentorships develop. The clearest potential conundrum of testing these propositions for firms is that they may be creating the

conditions under which their most “mobile” employees leave the organization. Intra-organizational mentorship focuses on the need to transfer firm-specific information from long-service employees to new employees. That information bonds the employee closer to the firm and the mentor with all of the resulting benefits to the firm. If these propositions are proven correct, then the very process of building connections between the new employee and the firm through a long-service employee establishes the process by which that new employee departs the firm. The mentor, if truly fulfilling their role, may eventually optimize the career outcomes for the employee in opportunities external to the firm.

Does this mean the firm needs to partner diverse mentors and protégés? Not necessarily. The ability to connect at any level requires finding common ground and building trust or else the mentoring is impaired. We have also developed a belief in positive modification of the protégés behavior. The literature is largely silent on this issue yet amongst practitioners, there is a strong belief in both aspects of this statement. First, that for mentoring to be effective it must be positive for both parties to the mentorship. Both parties must see both short-term and long-term benefits from the relationship continuing. Even in this era of the “snowflake”, this does not mean that mentors should not correct, chide or take down a protégé; but rather that the relationship must be one of building strength and competency. Positive mentoring experiences helped grow organizations as diverse as the United States Department of Energy and one-time startups like Etsy and Facebook. Likewise, the result of mentoring has to be behavior modification. Again, both practitioners and academics suggest this needs further analysis.

What Gets Lost When Mentorship Is Impaired?

Chen (2016) argues relational mentorship provides the protégé with knowledge about the unspoken rules within the industry and more importantly the general rules for business success. A pair of Carnegie Tech graduates have been compiling a list of rules for success in business. A sample of which includes:

- Never, ever complain even if your idiotic boss criticizes your splendid work or your dopey peers screw you. Complaining is like showing a poker opponent your cards. Appear clueless about such mortal things.
- Let your ambition be known but never shown. Write out your expectations and make sure your boss is aware of it. To your peers, express interest only in your work. St. Teresa of Avilla comes to mind.
- Publish memos, white papers, concept papers, proposals, any damn thing – it shows initiative and acts as an exhibit in your file. Make sure you can write. Most people write like fifth graders with emotional problems.
- Cultivate a sense of dignity. Never, never, never wear a costume or a funny hat. People in chicken suits never make it to the top.
- Always carry a book, something serious, maybe by a dead Yugoslavian with a funny name like Milovan Djilas. When asked about it say, “Heavy going.”
- Cultivate repose, inner tranquility brought about by supreme confidence you may or may not feel. Do not scratch or wiggle. Control your darting eyes.
- Don’t hang out on the job. You are being paid to be productive so look productive even if you aren’t. Walk briskly by with a nice wave and a smile even if you are on your way to the bathroom.
- Arrive early – except for social functions. They will think you are needy. In meetings bring other work and be there when the meeting coordinator arrives. It will give you a quiet moment of work and the reputation for being, God forbid, prompt.
- Stay late – except for social functions. They will think you have nowhere to go. At meetings, stay and complete your notes. Your stupid Blackberry and computer can manage alone for a few extra minutes.
- Never lie; save it. Never cheat on an expense account, never take more credit on a project than you deserve, never make stupid excuses. Placing huge bets on long shots with small payoffs is a quick route to the document retention department.

- Avoid a nickname. People named Dee Dee or Bud work for the Lisas and Johns of the world. No one ever called Warren Buffet “Buffie”.

Who Should Be the Subject of Any Study of This Phenomenon?

As we think about how to operationalize these propositions one the key considerations is visibility. Given the high profile of senior executives and their likelihood of having multiple experiences with mentoring, it would seem that they are the logical choice. Any test would have to include both sides of the dyadic relationship (Pinto, Slevin and English, 2009). Surveying senior leadership would both be consistent with the literature and allow for an additional question for which we found no support in the literature, the issue of whether potential protégés today would be more likely to seek out mentors outside of their current organizations. Senior executives being high-enough in profile to attract the attention of individuals outside their organization.

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