

A STUDY TO DETERMINE NURSE ADMINISTRATORS'
PERCEPTIONS OF THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP
AND ITS EFFECT ON THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIVES

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This descriptive study explored the general characteristics of mentoring relationships and the effects of these relationships on their professional lives as perceived by nurse administrators. The adult developmental theoretical framework was utilised in researching the problem statement, developing the survey instrument and analysing the data.

METHODS USED: The sample selection consisted of the 637 members of the California Society for Nursing Service Administrators. The membership consisted of top level nurse managers. The sample population received a information as well as the perceived effects of the mentoring relationship on the nurse administrators professional lives. Data analysis was primarily expressed in percentages and displayed in the bar graphs.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS: The overwhelmingly positive responses of the

nurse administrators supported the literature review that describes a variety of significant positive developments as a result of mentoring relationships.

A surprising fifty-eight (58%) percent of the surveys were returned indicating a high level of interest in mentoring. Ninety-seven percent (97%) indicated changes had occurred in their lives with a change in self-confidence indicated most frequently (74%). Over eighty percent (80%) indicated the relationship was valuable.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The study identified and the recommendations included, several areas that warrant future research. Open-ended questions need to be avoided when the exploratory survey method is utilised. The age of the mentor and mentee as well as the length of mentoring relationships need further research. Are the number of mentoring relationships on the rise or are they declining? A better understanding and definition of mentoring seems necessary as well as alternative approaches to the study question.

MENTORING

All nurses, be they in administration, academia or in the clinical setting should consider including in their professional code of ethics a responsibility to develop, nurture and support colleagues. Many avenues are open to all of us, every day, to open doors, to provide thoughtful feedback or to hurry on our own way, to encourage our novices or let them struggle on alone, to empower the future of nursing or impede our professions progress.

This descriptive study explored the general characteristics of mentoring relationships and the effects of these relationships on their professional lives as perceived by nurse administrators. The adult developmental theoretical framework was utilised in researching the problem statement, developing the survey instrument and analysing the data. There were two (2) research questions:

1. How do nurse administrators describe the characteristics of mentoring relationships?
2. How do they perceive the effects of those relationships on their professional lives?

The majority of nurses practice nursing within an organisation. Considering that hospitals are very big businesses and that they have complicated, multifaceted hierarchies, one cannot help but see that interest and research into professional development and the mentor relationship is

extremely important. It is within the hospital organisation that most nurses develop or grow as individuals and as professionals.

Contemporary literature is filled with varying definitions and descriptions of Mentoring. The mentor relationship is described as similar to the parent-child relationship and the words "intense," "emotional," and "exclusionary," are frequently seen. Mentoring is usually charged with emotion, and is a serious, mutual, non-sexual loving relationship. The expression "inquisitive teacher" is used when discussing a mentor. It would appear from these descriptions that mentoring is a high-level human relationship of some significance. Clearly, this is different than the more superficial "role model/preceptor" that has been much more commonly discussed in nursing literature.

Kathleen May describes in the simplest terms... "mentorship is an intense relationship calling for a high degree of involvement between a novice in a discipline and a person who is knowledgeable and wise in that area" (May, 1982).

Value of Mentoring

Business and management literature contains many references and discussions regarding the mentor-mentee phenomenon. Its value to organisational as well as personnel development has been clearly established. Much of the emphasis in the past has been oriented to the predominantly male management hierarchy. Edgar Schein (1978), discusses the obvious situation that exists in organisations when new employees look to more experienced personnel for advice and information. Schein then develops several roles that the willing older "mentor" can assume to assist in the development of the new "mentee." His analysis concludes with the observation that the mentor does not necessarily have to be a recognised power figure within the organisation, but that the experience and the willingness to share are important.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977), uses the term "sponsor" to describe the mentor relationship. According to Kanter, the very important role that sponsors play in the power struggle at all levels of the organisation have three primary characteristics. The ability to often be in a position to fight for a mentee was the first. To point out superior performance at key times, as well as promote or support a recommendation from a novice, are key ingredients of the relationship. Secondly, the ability to by-pass the hierarchy and obtain inside information within the organisation was important. Kanter describes a third and last key ingredient as "reflected power." Support from those with formal or informal power accelerated the movement of the novice up the ladder of the organisation.

Women and Mentors

One can safely assume that the low number of women in higher levels of management in the business and professional world clearly reduces the number of available (female) mentors. Elizabeth Bolton, 1980 describes four other reasons why women do not have available mentors. The lack of emphasis on team sports for a girl in childhood reduces her effectiveness in later life on a business or professional "team." Solitary activities such as cooking and piano lessons are more common to young girls. Boys are traditionally encouraged to participate in rugby, soccer and basketball; developing expertise to use in a team effort. Another drawback is the "queen bee" phenomenon; the idea that some women believe there can only be one at the top. Another reason, according to Bolton, is the potential sexual aspects found in a close personal, albeit business or professional relationship. Lastly, Bolton felt that many men do not perceive talent that merits attention in career women.

The generally accepted model of the emotional (female) versus the analytical (male) leads many theorists to believe that women are much more likely to personalise, internalise, and resent criticism, thus affecting the mentor-mentee relationship. Openness and frankness are a necessary component for the mentor relationship to be effective and useful as a growth experience.

The emphasis on the affiliative socialisation needs of women could impact the mentoring process. "Belonging" is associated with feminine socialisation; achieving is the focus of socialisation for men. Since the purpose of mentoring is achievement it would seem that mentoring would not be consistent with feminine socialisation. However, the skills of cooperation and collaboration could also support and enhance mentoring (Hamilton, 1981).

In *Beyond Sex Roles*, Alice Sargent discusses the many positive aspects of the mentor relationship as described in other literature, but emphasises what she considers most important. The true value, beyond the teaching, sponsoring and sharing roles, is the "blessing" in and of itself. To warrant the time and attention ("the blessing") of the mentor is the real worth to the mentee--- to have someone believe in one enhances one's belief in oneself (Sargent, 1977).

Cynthia Epstein (1979) supports this perspective of the mentor relationship. For women to succeed, cleverness and professional degrees are simply not enough. Colleagues and seniors must deem possible proteges worthy of 'judgement of potential.'

Conflicting opinion exists in the literature regarding the selection of a mentor or mentee. Advice for women abounds. Assigning mentors and mentees is an exercise in futility (Shapiro, 1978). Many knowledgeable human relations experts believe that the right interpersonal dynamics must exist. Some believe that it is like falling in love--- you can't force it

to happen and "it only works if the chemistry is right" (Williams, 1977). Concentrating on doing the job well, learning and self-improvement seem to be the best ways to enable talent and enthusiasm for professional development to show. As progress and development becomes self-evident, many will find that a mentor relationship has naturally developed (Farris, 1981). Displaying a teachable attitude and an eagerness to learn will convey a receptive attitude to possible mentors (Williams, 1977).

Other literature directed towards women assumes a more aggressive approach to the selection of a mentor and/or mentee. Emphasis is placed on the responsibility of leading women to bring along, indeed seek out, younger women to develop within an area of expertise. Younger women are also urged to seek out a mentor or mentors to assist them, especially at critical points in their career progress, such as in the beginning or during a change of career direction or promotion.

Nursing and Mentoring

Vance, 1977, discovered interesting information regarding nurses and mentoring in her research on 71 identified leaders in nursing. A surprising 83% reported having had one or more mentors. Ninety-three percent stated they were mentors to others. Those who had had a mentor found them in teachers, professional work colleagues, employers, administrators, deans and others. Seventy percent of the mentors were nurses, and 79% were women.

The identified leaders described the mentor as having provided many types of help, such as career advice, guidance, promotion (24%), professional role modelling (20%), intellectual and scholarly stimulation (15%), inspiration and idealism (14%), teaching, advising and tutoring (13%), emotional support (11%), and other sharing, such as financial advice and support (3%). It is interesting to note that the most help is in the area of advancement.

White (1988) reports the majority of academic nurse-administrators she studied indicated having one or more 'career' mentors in their lives who were important to career success and professional development. The academic nurse-administrators generally believed that others should have one or more mentors to be successful.

Theoretical Framework

Only as recently as the 1970's have we seen research into the theoretical development of the adult. Daniel Levinson (1978) in *The Seasons of Man's Life*, provides a concise and thorough review of his

findings after studying 40 selected men--- 10 executives, 10 biologists, 10 factory workers and 10 novelists. His theories are supported by his research

that indicated that human beings continue to change throughout their adult life, based on an age-linked timetable.

Levinson found that in early adulthood (age 20 to 40), several distinct developmental changes occur in a certain sequence. The young man of 22 to 28 enters the adult world. From 28 to 33 he analyses what has occurred so far, and takes steps to alter or change what he feels is inappropriate. From 33 to roughly mid-life, he invests himself in realising his goals. At about 40 he stops to take stock of the first half of his life. The compromises that were necessary in the first half of his life and the realisation or lack of realisation of his goal(s) are a crucial component of the infamous mid-life transition. At approximately 45 years of age, a pattern is established that modifies his life structure to accommodate the mid-life analysis. Significant for mentoring, many men find the last half of their adult life is the fullest and the most satisfying. Although Levinson's study did not extend beyond the late forties, he indicated that there is evidence that the pattern of transitional periods versus stable periods continues throughout adulthood.

The first half of one's life's experience serves one well as one relaxes with success or retreats from the struggle for advancement. Being looked at as worthy of consultation and advice satisfies a basic human need.

Levinson's work dealt with men. The application to the development of adult women is unclear. It would appear that the most significant work to date involving women is Gail Sheehy's (1976) popular *Passages*, where men and women are studied. Both studies found clear life stages where internal changes occurred, not directly related to external changes such as divorce, death, marriage and births..

The wisdom that frequently develops after mid-life analysis sets the stage for the mentoring condition. Levinson and Sheehy both describe the importance of the recognition of the costs and gains--- the trade-offs that are necessary as life experiences evolve and careers develop. It is apparent that at certain transitional points in one's life, the mentor relationship has profound and significant value to both the mentee and the mentor. As one sees the ladder ahead, one can often, also see someone ahead who has been climbing.

Levinson refers to "generativity" or the sense that one feels for

the continuity of life and the concern for the future generations. This can be seen at home, at work, in friendships, in government, and indeed in the world. Usually, only after mid-life does this sense of responsibility for others (development) take an active role. A clear understanding of adult developmental theory lends credence to the significance and importance of mentoring for the mentor as well as the mentee.

Levinson states that the mentor functions primarily as a transitional figure. "He.... is usually older than his protege by a half-generation, roughly 8 to 15 years. He is experienced as a responsible, admirable, older sibling." It would appear that the pre-mid-life adult would be most susceptible to the protege role just as the post-mid-life adult would be most susceptible to the mentoring role. Welcoming, acquainting, guiding, hosting and counseling would serve both adults well.

Study Design

To identify common characteristics descriptive of a mentoring relationship, the approach selected for the study design was the descriptive, exploratory survey. The California Society for Nursing Service Administrators is a 637 member organisation of top level nurse executives. The entire membership was used as the sample for the study.

Summary of Findings

Of the 637 surveys distributed to nurse administrators, a surprising 58% responded (367). Fifty-six percent (207) indicated they had one or more mentoring relationships and 44%(160) indicated they had never had a mentoring relationship. Fifty-eight percent (119) of the respondents had experienced one mentoring relationship, 35% (73) had experienced two and 7% (15) attested to more than two.

The age distribution of nurse administrators who had mentors appeared to be as expected, (pre-mid-life), however the age distribution of the mentor highlighted an interesting finding. Almost half of the mentors (48 percent) were described between the ages of 36 and 45. Another 20 percent were between the ages of 31 and 35. Twenty-two percent were described between the ages of 46 and 55.

According to Levinson the adult between the ages of 28 and 33 spends time in self analysis. Taking steps to alter or change areas of life that

seem

inappropriate are typical of this age. The age distributions of the mentees

correlate well with Levinson's theory. The age distributions of the mentors are somewhat younger than would be expected. Post mid-life is the age when mentoring would be expected to be the most common. This survey indicates a younger age bracket for the mentor. The younger average age group of the mentor as identified by nurse administrators could be attributed to the emergence of younger more experienced women in the work world. Women are currently becoming better educated and prepared for their positions. Increased confidence and skill in their various roles could enhance mentoring connections.

The finding that such a large percentage of mentors were between the ages of 30 and 40 opens up some interesting areas for future research. Is age

important? Does a younger mentor provide a different, better, quicker development? Are mentoring relationships becoming more common? Presently one can only speculate.

Seventy-seven percent (159) stated their mentor was a female, 23% (48) were males. In a predominantly female profession it would be expected

that the majority of the mentors would be female. However, the percentage of male mentors is higher than one would expect. The lack of available female mentors, however, has been discussed in the literature review.

Almost half of the relationships (48%) are described as lasting from

six months to two years. Almost one-fourth (24%) were described as lasting five years or more. A question exists about the mentoring relationship that

lasts five years or more. Mentoring is designed to develop, promote growth, and move individuals from one stage to another. Levinson described it as "transitional." Are relationships that exist for 5 years or more mentoring? Are they healthy? Are they now 'friendships'?

Ninety-seven percent of the respondents attributed changes in their professional/personal lives to the mentoring relationship. Three percent of the respondents (6) indicated they could attribute no changes due to the relationship. The respondents indicating that they had experienced a mentoring relationship, indicated 755 changes. A change in self-confidence was indicated by 74% (154) of the 207 respondents. Sixty-five percent (134) of the respondents attributed a change in self awareness. More

than half of the respondents (56%) attributed self actualisation to the mentoring relationship.

"Other changes" were indicated and include such positive outcomes as:

Enhanced global thinking
Treated as a human being

Risk taking
Increased self esteem
Professional skill development
Job enrichment and expansion
Search for wisdom and world understanding
Check and balance of ideas
Model to follow
Research expertise increased
Commitment to excellence
Human relationship knowledge and skills
New experiences, horizons
Recognition in organisation
Goal changes
Decision to move into management
Professional growth and knowledge
Power, political awareness
Improved performance as a manager

On a scale of 1 to 7, nurse administrators were asked to rate the effect of the mentoring relationship on their professional lives. Eighty percent of the respondents selected 1 and 2 (1 representing very valuable). One percent (2) of those surveyed selected 6 and 7. These findings support the positive perceptions of nurse administrators regarding the mentoring relationship. The percentage of nurse administrators who had had a mentoring relationship and were currently serving as mentors was 54% and the percentage who had been a mentor in the past was 75%.

Answers to three descriptive questions depicting the perceptions of nurse executives of the mentoring experience were collectively analysed in two different ways: 1) positive and negative terminology and 2) personal and professional development. Of the 194 who responded, 99% used positive terminology. One respondent used negative terminology (wasteful, inadequate) and one respondent had mixed terminology (sharing, freedom, then loss, bitterness).

The three questions were categorised according to key words indicating a personal (growth) relationship as opposed to a professional (growth) relationship. Key words such as support, intense, personal, closeness, trust, and caring were categorised as personal in nature. Words such as management skills, administration politics, education and leadership were identified as professional. Seventy-nine percent (154) of the responses were categorised as personal. Twenty-one percent (40) confined their responses to the less personal terminology. Support or one of its derivatives was used 61 times and was the most common word used in the responses.

Seventy-seven of the respondents described give and take

discussions

without judgment, an airing of opinions and nonjudgemental critiquing of performance. The inclusion of a relationship seemed to differentiate mentoring from role modeling. Common responses were "deeper," "loved," "involved," and "total trust."

Research questions for the future seem abundant. The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of nurse administrators. These perceptions were clearly positive. This study would indicate that much research remains to be conducted for a more thorough understanding of this valuable human relationship.

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