The Dark Side of Mentoring

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Introduction

A common theme that emerges from the literature is that mentoring is a beneficial and desirable process that abounds with rewards not only for participants but for the organization as well. The proliferation of formal mentoring programs in both business and educational settings attests to a widespread belief in their effectiveness. An image is generally presented of a glowing picture of the wonders of mentoring, but as identified by Jacobi (1991) at least some of the researchers and practitioners are sceptical given the commitment involved. In fact, under various conditions the mentoring relationship can actually be detrimental to the mentor, mentee or both. This paper seeks to illuminate the other side of the mentoring experience by examining some of the literature in educational contexts that explores the mentoring phenomenon.

Definition of mentoring

Mentoring is a planned and intentional process which is considered to be developmental in that it enhances the individual both personally and professionally. The key characteristics of mentoring identify that significant assistance is offered in a warm and nurturing environment and that this assistance is offered by a skilled and experienced person. It is focussed on sharing of experiences and realities with participants who sit, listen and reflect on areas of interest or concern. It recognizes that reflective practice takes patience and guidance, but advocates that this has tremendous power because it helps the individual to grow through self-discovery. It is a reciprocal process - both the mentor and mentees gain from the relationships by exploring and sharing their own thinking through co-operation and community connectedness. All members collaborate which implies that each individual brings an expertise and experience to the activity where neither party dominates.

The functions of mentoring should therefore reflect the following components of a mentoring relationship;

1) emotional and psychological support
2) direct assistance with career and professional development
3) role modelling which is focussed on achievement of skills and
 knowledge within the organizational context which will ultimately lead
 to enhancedpractice and a broadening of values.

However whilst the author advocates mentoring as a form of staff
development there is an absence of critique to guide it. Rather the
literature on mentoring predominantly describes the benefits of the
process without attempting to develop a critical position from which it
can be developed. The purpose of this paper is to correct this void and
to present a position which focuses on the concerns and limitations of

the mentoring process as delineated from a review of the field in this
area. These have been tabled below thereby exposing the risks involved
for potential candidates who may seek involvement in this type of
relationship. In particular the concerns regarding gender match and
those held by the mentor and mentee are examined as these have
dominated the available literature. It is interesting to note that
discussion about the limitations of mentoring have focussed on the
participants and the process without wider consideration of the
implications for the organization.

Concerns about Mentoring

The process of mentoring effects the whole organization and requires
time, patience and effort (Galvez-Hjorvevik 1986). This in itself can
be quite costly in regards to resources both human and material (Holt
1982). The major variable of concern reported upon from the majority
of stakeholders is that mentoring is time consuming for all concerned
and this factor alone can become overwhelming. Mentoring also requires
energy to establish and maintain a profitable relationship which
according to Holt (1982) and Blackwell (1989) is often not adequately
rewarded or appreciated by some of the stakeholders in the process . In
order for mentoring to be effective, then the following concerns
identified from the table should be noted and addressed.

Table 1 :Concerns about Mentoring

● Mentoring is time consuming for all
   concerned
Holt 1982; Farren et al 1984; Burke 1984;
Busch 1985; Howey 1988; Noe 1988;
Blackwell 1989; Ragins 1989; Manson 1990; Redmond 1990; Littleton et al
1992;

● Poor planning of process
Howey 1988; Cameron and Jesser 1992; Tellez 1992; Wildman et al 1992;

● Unsuccessful matching
   -personality
   -gender
   -expectations

Hunt and Michael 1983; Gerstein 1985; Frey
and Noller 1986; Cameron and Jesser 1992;
Newby and Heide 1992; Beattie and Sutton
1993;

● Lack of understanding of the mentoring
   process
 eg. commitment demands, misconception of
   roles

Frey and Noller 1986; Garratt 1990; Playko
1991; Cameron and Jesser 1992;

● Can create work tensions
Farren et al 1984; McCormick 1991; Lawson 1992;

● Few available mentors
   -especially women
Burke 1984; Busch 1985; Wright and Wright 1987; Hill et al 1989a;
McCormick 1991; Matczynski and Comer 1991; Wunsch 1993; Poole 1994;

● Overuse of the available mentors
Burke 1984; Frey and Noller 1986; Redmond 1990; Poole 1994;

● Lack of access for women and minority
   groups
Levinson et al 1978; Hunt and Michael 1983; Merriam 1983; Willis and
Dodgson 1986;
Wright and Wright 1987; Eberspacher and
Sisler 1989; Ragins 1989; Jacobi 1991;
Johnsrud 1991; Matczynski and Comer 1991; McCormick 1991; Sands et al
1991; Cameron
and Jesser 1992; Poole 1994;

• Reproduction of the mentor's work style
Blackwell 1989; Coombe 1989; McCormick 1991; Lawson 1992; Madison et al 1993;
Matters 1994;

• Poor relationships between mentor/mentee
 eg. overprotection; unwillingness to act;
 sexual overtones; poor teaching; exploitive;
 over dependence.
Holt 1982; Merriam 1983; Busch 1985; Frey
and Noller 1986; Galvez-Hjornevik 1986;
Wright and Wright 1987; Hill et al 1989a;
Ragins 1989; Garratt 1990; Lyons et al 1990; Fleming 1991; Playko 1991; Madison et al
1993;

• High visibility of program
Farren et al 1984; Hunt and Michael 1984;
Garratt 1990; Krueger et al 1992;

• Imposed mentoring
 - Do you have the right mentor/mentee?
 - Power imbalance
 - Another form of assessment
 - Contrived collegiality

Hunt and Michael 1983; Knox and McGovern 1988; Garratt 1990; Johnsrud 1991; Lawson 1992; Martinez 1992; Tellez 1992;

An analysis of the table reveals that mentoring often fails to fully reach its objectives or even completely dissolves with disastrous consequences because there has been insufficient time allowed for the development of the mentoring relationship (Cameron and Jesser 1992). Mentoring in some cases studied by Wildman et al (1992:205) has proved "...to be a less than ideal reform tactic, especially when programs

have been implemented with too little conceptual understanding of mentoring, unrealistic expectations and poorly thought out implementation strategies". As proposed by Howey (1988) a more sustained sequence of instructional activity and follow up support is needed than has been traditionally provided by formal mentoring endeavours. Tellez (1992) also supports this claim suggesting that many mentoring programs are not well planned with little consideration given to the selection and matching of mentors and mentees. Coupled with this

Frey and Noller (1986) and Playko (1991) report there is often a misconception of the roles and/or concept of mentoring where participants fail to understand the nature of shared responsibilities and expectations needed to create and sustain a positive working relationship.

If the participants have been successfully matched, often incompatible work schedules or the tyranny of distance serves to disrupt the mentoring process (Noe 1988; Tinker et al, 1993). For many, the opportunity to be even matched is beyond their reach as with both formal and informal mentoring many talented people are not chosen or lucky enough to find a mentor (Fleming 1991). The trauma of unsuccessful matches or the breaking of successful matches has also been reported as a major concern by Frey and Noller (1986). Personality conflict between the mentor and mentee where the 'chemistry' is not good is another major variable that has led to a breakdown in mentoring relationships (Gerstein 1985, Cameron and Jesser 1992). As Hunt and Michael (1983) report, relationships that are not complementary or are prematurely ended may result in a loss of self-esteem, frustration, blocked opportunity and a sense of betrayal. Lack of commitment from either the mentor, mentee or both has also been found by Garratt (1990) and Cameron and Jesser (1992) to erode the success of a mentoring program.

Where mentor programs are forced, the mentoring relations often formed can lead to kind of contrived collegiality. This model is not inherently beneficial because as argued by Lawson (1992) it can undermine trust and openness which is essential to the establishment and maintenance of a collaborative culture. Yet even where mentoring has been successful, McCormick (1991) has found that it has led to a negative result as it has promoted competition in the work setting as it has focussed too much on the personal ambition of the individual. This has then created an environment which promotes elitism for the mentee and exclusion for the non-mentored where Farren et al (1984) and Lawson (1992) report that those without a mentor may become jealous.

The Homogenous Nature of Mentoring (Conflicts between the purpose of mentoring)

McCormick (1991) and Johnsrud (1991) have found in their research that cross-race and cross-gender mentor-mentee relationships have often not met with success due to personal and organizational barriers. Other researchers (Blackwell 1989; Hill et al 1989a; Ragins 1989; Fleming 1991; Johnsrud 1991; McCormick 1991) have found that mentors tend to select mentees who are the same gender, have the same social and cultural attributes or background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion and social class. Therefore, many of these researchers conclude that mentoring is homogenous in nature. Whilst this may or not be so, some of the literature is quite forthright in reporting on gender issues that may cause disruption to the mentoring

process (Merriam 1983; Frey and Noller 1986; Hill et al 1989a; Fleming 1991; Jacobi 1991). A review of some of the literature concerning the gender match between mentor and mentee may serve to highlight some of these concerns thereby alerting participants in the mentoring process

to potential limitations.

Gender Concerns

Hill et al (1989a) have reported that mentoring has been dominated by men, as both the mentor and mentee in the majority of cases are male and therefore it has often been viewed as the exclusive domain of the male (Eberspacher and Sisler 1989; Fagenson 1989). This might be due to the practice that it has been more available to men than women (Burke 1984; Hill et al 1989a) as mentoring has historically been part of the male informal network system where according to Willis and Dodgson (1986) and Ragins (1989), few women can access this 'old boy network' system. Hill et al (1989a) claim women further restrict themselves from the use of this powerful informal communication channel because they rely almost exclusively on formal organizational systems of communication. Therefore, women as identified by Jacobi (1991) and Matczynski and Comer (1991) are often denied access to the career ladder of advancement.

The role of mentor takes a great deal of dedication and produces many demands on the mentor. The role also requires people who are well regarded within their profession and this may be one reason as identified by Fleming (1991) why there is not an abundance of mentors. This situation creates strong competition for good mentors who are usually white males (Wright and Wright 1987; Hill et al 1989b; McCormick 1991). Not only is there is a scarcity of mentors but a scarcity of women serving in senior positions who could be identified as appropriate mentors (Matczynski and Comer 1991). Wright and Wright (1987) identified that there are few references about female mentors in the literature thus supporting the claim that most mentors are male. Burke (1984) and Busch (1985) both report that there are also significantly fewer female mentees than their male counterparts, regardless of whether they have a male or female mentor. Sands et al (1991) further claim that both men and women mentees are therefore more likely to be mentored by men. In academe Wunsch (1993:354) reports "males have more natural access to these kinds of mentors (senior colleagues; and heads of departments) than females. Males still hold the majority of senior faculty positions and have a stronger inclination to mentor other men." Even though women more than ever are entering the academic profession, as determined by Moses (1993), the proportion of women at least at senior lecturing level has hardly increased. Ragins (1989), Jacobi (1991) and Sands et al (1991) suggest that many mentors and mentees may feel more comfortable developing a professional and personal relationship with the same gender. As such,

women may be less likely than men to obtain a mentor because of gender preferences expressed by both mentor and mentee. This could then ultimately exclude women from entering a mentoring relationship thus creating imbalance and disadvantage of access particularly for women and minority groups. This situation has been reported upon extensively in the literature, particularly in education as identified from the preceding table.

Other reasons that may account for poor access for women to a mentoring relationship might be that women do not actually seek a mentor because they do not recognise its importance in career advancement (Ragins 1989), or that traditional male paradigms of mentoring may be incompatible with female paradigms of knowledge and their world (Hunt and Michael 1983; McCormick 1991). However, as Ragins (1989:7) claims, "Even if women recognise the importance of mentors, they may not have the knowledge, skills or strategies necessary to obtain a mentor."

Hunt and Michael (1983), also report that there may be a general

discomfort felt by women in a male-mentored relationship due to sexual tensions and fears and public scrutiny of the relationship. While male mentees may develop friendships and socialize with their mentors both inside and outside the work setting, female counterparts may be restrained from developing comparable friendships which constrains the mentoring relationship. Since mentoring may be an intense relationship, Hill et al (1989a), Ragins (1989) and Fleming (1991) have found some people do not feel that opposite genders can engage in this type of activity without love or sexual relationships forming, therefore they avoid this kind of mentoring experience. Both Hunt and Michael (1983) and Hill et al (1989b) found that stereotypes still exist which cast the female as a greater risk due to the many life demands women must balance in addition to their careers. It is a sad indictment of modern times as reflected upon by Matters (1994:2) "that increasingly this closeness has unsavoury labels attached to it when in reality it is the most obvious sign of a lasting and true partnership which sustains and energises both parties."

Women are also disadvantaged because many lack access to informal settings frequented by males (Ragins 1989) or become 'spoilers' because certain decisions can no longer be made on the golf course, and other places. (Hill et al 1989b). In some cases, researchers (Hill et al 1989b; Ragins 1989; Fleming 1991) claim that women tend to be perceived as having a poor 'fit' with the organization because where a mentor and mentee are engaged in a cross-gender relationship, they may receive direct pressure from office gossip, unfounded rumours, jealous co-workers and even spouses to end the relationship particularly when the work involves frequent and lengthy meetings often of a deep and involved nature, or may involve travel. As recognized by Lyons et al (1990) the interaction between mentor and mentee is a complex one,

imbedded in a pattern of formal and informal constraints imposed by the organizational environment and society. As so dramatically captured by Madison et al (1993:78) who wrote "Across the centuries, a warning clear from the poet...beware. So with any intense relationship, it is not always a risk-free situation."

Abuses of the mentoring relationship such as over-extended relationships and male-female relationships have been reported upon in the literature (Merriam 1983; Frey and Noller 1986; Fleming 1991). However as Jacobi (1991) has alluded too, empirical research regarding gender issues is in short supply. Other general concerns, some of which are traumatic, whilst others appear lesser in impact, are reported below.

Mentor Concerns

Mentoring, it has been claimed by Coombe (1989), and McCormick (1991), promotes and maintains the status quo by socialising the mentees into 'the rules of the game'. However, this could be counter productive as it could result in the mentee being moulded into what the mentor sees as being the acceptable way of doing things. As Blackwell (1989), Lawson (1992) and Madison et al (1993) argue, mentoring can also often reproduce the work style of the mentor and the work orientation of the organization which sanctions an elitist patron system which may clone managers and administrators and exclude the socially different. This may leave little opportunity for the development of innovation or the encouragement of change and revitalization within an organization. Thus the mentoring program may become a system for organizational socialization, which may or may not be a desirable outcome.

Mentorship is a unique role where not everyone who volunteers may be suitable (Daresh and Playko 1990; Newby and Heide 1992). Holt (1982)

has reported that chosen mentors may possess many of the skills and aptitudes required to perform their functions, but even after training may not possess the qualities essential to the efficient performance of a mentorship role. Therefore the professional and personal qualities of a mentor is bound to affect the character of the mentor-mentee relationship (Galvez-Hjornevik 1986).

In some of the literature (Matczynski and Comer 1991; Galvez-Hjornevik 1986, Wright and Wright 1987) it has been noted that often when a male mentor and female mentee match has been formed, the mentee has often experienced being overprotected by the mentor or being held at a greater social distance than their male counterparts which has led to a general discomfort in male-female mentored relationships. Wright and Wright (1987) also suggest that mentors may be exploitive and use mentees to only further their career. Garratt (1990) has further found that mentors can become patronizing if not committed to the process or

have their own agenda for mentoring an individual. As summarized by
Matters (1994:6) "Mentoring partnerships tend to break down immediately
if the mentor or the mentee exhibit overtly self serving behaviours."

However, it is also fair to point out that if mentors are matched with
poor mentees, then their performance could negatively reflect on the
mentor. As Hunt and Michael (1983), Ragins (1984); Wright and Wright
(1987) and Newby and Heide (1992) acknowledge often a mentee cannot
take criticism or won't listen to the counsel of the mentor or may not
perform up to expectations which can lead to a breakup of the
relationship. Once the relationship experiences major difficulties, the
relationship itself can become quite destructive for all concerned.

Besides these concerns regarding the mentor, Burke (1984), Frey and
Noller (1986) and Redmond (1990) identify that there is a scarcity of
suitably qualified mentors. Of those that do qualify, most are already
overburdened with organizational matters, teaching, research and
community involvement responsibilities, especially in tertiary
education. To become engaged in another or possibly two or three
time-consuming mentor-mentee relationships is very demanding, both
personally and professionally. There is a strong risk of overloading
the few available mentors, especially if they are women as there are
even fewer female mentors available for this position as identified by
Poole (1994). Besides the concerns that the literature has provided
regarding the mentor, issues focussing on the mentee have also been
reported.

Mentee Concerns

Ragins (1989) and Hill et al (1989b) have found that a mentor may not
have the necessary power to promote the mentee within the
organizational political and career structures. Farren et al (1984) in
their earlier research found that a female mentor may not be as
influential as a male mentor or be as powerful. This may minimalize the
effects of the mentoring relationship as it can hinder the upward
mobility of the mentee, regardless whether they are male or female.

However, when a mentee is matched with a powerful mentor, often the
formal program has high visibility which according to Farren et al
(1984) may produce high expectations for success. This puts a lot of
pressure upon mentees to constantly perform with careful scrutiny of
their professional behaviour (Krueger et al 1992). Coupled with this,
mentors will be subject to the usual political rise and fall of any
organization, and if mentees are seen to be closely associated with
them, then they too will unwittingly have to ride that reflected
switchback (Garratt 1990). As identified by Hunt and Michael (1983),

relationships with the wrong mentor can cost mentees valuable career
time and bring them negative feedback by association.

Tellez (1992) has found that a plaguing question often for mentees is concerned with whether they have the right mentor. As Wright and Wright (1987) report, the mentee could become attached to a poor mentor. In some cases Coombe (1989) has found that the mentee has been pressured to comply with the mentor's view on what constitutes good practice rather than to apply an autonomous professional assessment of a given situation. Playko (1991) has reported similar findings in that some mentees have found their mentors to be closed minded about alternative solutions to complex problems. If mentees do not fit in with the mentor's plan, they may experience difficulty and will need to rely on their line manager and the appraisal system to see them through (Garratt 1990). As identified by Martinez (1992), mentees are not only inexperienced but often new to the organization which subsequently creates a great power differential. Therefore it is unlikely under such conditions that mentors will be "mates" which as acknowledged by Knox and McGovern (1988) and Johnsrud (1991) creates a disproportionate allocation and imbalance of power. When imposed mentoring loses its spontaneity and its intrinsically non-judgemental value, it runs the risk of becoming another form of assessment for the mentee.

Other concerns reported upon in the literature include situations where the mentor could feel threatened by the mentee's professional growth (Wright and Wright 1987), opposition from the mentee's supervisors who may feel that the mentor is undermining their authority with the mentee (Cameron and Jesser 1992) and the situation where the mentee becomes overly dependent on the mentor (Busch 1985, Wright and Wright 1987, Playko 1991). In fact, Madison et al (1993) suggest that a mentoring relationship that lasts beyond five years indicates that the relationship may not be healthy due to the elements of co-dependency. In an informal mentoring relationship a mentor or mentee can always choose to 'escape' quietly from the experience especially where the relationship has failed to reach or address the needs of those concerned. But as cautioned by Krueger et al (1992) and Lawson (1992) in a formal mentor program any retreat from the program takes place with full official awareness and acknowledgment; a situation which mentees may not wish to place upon themselves. In short the warning is clear; the status and consequences of a formal mentoring program should not be considered lightly.

Conclusion

Overall a review of the literature reveals that there is a lack of awareness about the concerns of mentoring and the ambivalence connected with institutionalized or formal mentoring programs. Instead much of the writing and research on the mentoring experience supports the benefits and potential of this phenomenon. However, as reported by Jacobi (1991) there is a lack of a theoretical or conceptual base to explain the proposed links between mentoring success. This review of the literature has endorsed this concern by revealing that there are

many doubts about the mentoring process which need further examination, research and reflection before the 'bonus bandwagon' of mentoring is embraced. It has sought to illuminate the dark side of the mentoring experience, exposing the risks involved which may assist reflection for present, past and potential candidates who seek to embrace this type of relationship. The difficulties identified may or may not be solved, but it is only through careful monitoring and discussion which focuses on these difficulties that progress can be made towards proclaiming mentoring as an effective means of staff development.

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