Mentoring: A Learning Collaboration

A review of current thinking on mentoring reveals benefits to both parties and a shift in responsibility to mentees to determine their developmental needs

By **Marilu Goodyear**

Mentoring has been a focus for individual career development since the mid-1980s when researchers and human resource administrators began to pay attention to its benefits. Research has shown that successful mentoring relationships can assist individuals in learning the ropes at an organization; increase career satisfaction, salaries, and influence in the organization; and decrease turnover rates.[1]

Over the years, the concept of mentoring has changed dramatically, particularly as the job environment has changed.[2] The presumed definition of mentoring as a one-on-one relationship between a senior member and a junior member of the same organization has expanded to include different types of relationships. Today's literature explores mentoring as a peer relationship that has expanded to include relationships within professions, not just those within the organization.[3]

What Is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a process whereby two or more individuals work together to develop the career and abilities of a single individual. Mentoring can focus on a career or personal context. This article focuses on those aspects that effect career development and success.

Career mentoring is generally thought to comprise three functions: career assistance, psychosocial support, and role modeling.[4] The area of career assistance focuses on the opportunities the mentor can give the mentee, including:

- Sponsorship (nomination for career advancement)
- Exposure/visibility (opportunity to engage in activities that expose others to the person's skills set)
- Challenging assignments (opportunity to stretch into new areas)
- Coaching (opportunity to learn new skills and understand new contexts)
- Protection (help in avoiding career derailment)

With psychosocial support, the focus of the mentoring collaboration is motivation and approval. This support includes:

- Acceptance/confirmation (helping the mentee see his or her value)
- Counseling (coaching in relation to feelings)
- Friendship (camaraderie)

Role modeling provides the opportunity for the mentee to observe others and learn from their actions, particularly in relationship to the application of personal values in work settings and strategic tactics used to address problems.

How Is Mentoring Done?

While it is common to think that mentoring consists only of formal programs where senior employees are asked to work with junior employees, the profile of mentoring relationships is far more diverse. Through groundbreaking research, Kathleen Kram found that most career professionals have a "developmental network" of individuals who provide mentoring functions.[5] These networks consist not only of senior staff in the profession but also of peers and even junior professionals, who often can help veterans learn a new skill. Family members and friends can also play important roles in a developmental network, particularly in the areas of role modeling and psychosocial support.

The concept of the developmental network shifts the focus of mentoring from the top-down approach of organizations assigning mentors to mentees to a more independent approach with the focus on the person mentored. In this modern concept of mentoring, the responsibility for mentoring sits squarely on the mentee. Mentees develop their own developmental networks in relation to their particular needs. Mentees reach out to individuals around them to seek assistance in the functional areas where they need help. Their reach can include supervisors, professional seniors, peers, and professional juniors as well as family members. Table 1 provides an example of a development network.

The concept of the developmental network enables the mentee to seek assistance from a variety of individuals. Researchers are now studying the contributions of mentoring to career success in relation to how diverse and how strong the developmental network becomes. They are exploring the proposition that if mentees reach out to a diverse set of mentors, the oppor-

tunities and assistance they receive will be more effective. The opportunity to interact with individuals from different institutions, backgrounds, professions, cultures, and social systems allows for greater diversity of perspective for mentees. Likewise, if those mentoring relationships are stronger (close emotional affect and more communication), the effect on the mentee is likely to be greater.

As you might see from Table 1, often mentees can gain access to mentoring through mentors' volunteering to help them. Even if this does not happen, however, mentees can reach out to mentors whom they see as potentially valuable. The request could be for a one-time conversation in a role-modeling mode (tell me about your career); a commitment to mentor in a specific area (could you teach me about budgeting?); or a specific period of time (this is my first year as a supervisor; would you help me through it?). For more information on finding mentors, see the Mentoring Information Kit at <http://www.educause.edu/mentoring/>.

What encourages mentors to work with an individual? Two factors appear to be most important in the decision to mentor: a sense of being able to relate to the person, and a belief that the person has potential. Similarity usually underlies the ability to relate to someone, although the similarity can be based on education, functional expertise, cultural background, personality, or common experience. While research shows that mentors most often chose mentees who are similar in some way, ample evidence exists that mentors also respond to expressions of need from mentees who are different from them. Mentees should therefore be encouraged to approach mentors, even if that person does not have much in common with them, if that person has the expertise they need. This is particularly important for the diversity of the profession and the success of women in information technology, given that the profession is occupied by more white men than women or minorities.

The mentor's perception that a potential mentee is motivated and has a positive attitude can make a significant difference in the decision to mentor. Mentors must believe that the time they will spend with the mentee will result in positive outcomes. Mentors are also drawn by the potential for the mentee to reflect well on them. There appears to be great potential for mentees to obtain a positive response from mentors if they simply ask for assistance, are sincere in their desires, and are willing to invest time and effort in the relationship.

Mentoring relationships are complex. Mentors and mentees might approach the relationship with different goals and needs. As the relationship develops, needs can change, and at times one person might want to continue the relationship while the other has gained all the benefit they perceive to be possible. Discussion of these goal aspirations and the phases of the relationship are beyond this article but are covered well in the work of Metros and Yang.[6]

Table 1

Example Developmental Network

Developmental Network Member	Mentoring Function	Potential Activities
Supervisor	Challenging assignments	■ Lead a critical project ■ Chair a campus-wide committee
Professional senior	Sponsorship/visibility, coaching	■ Nomination for jobs ■ Help with making a conference presentation ■ Coaching through coping with a problem with supervisor
Professional peer	Acceptance/ confirmation	■ Conversations that build confidence
Professional junior	Coaching	■ Help with learning a new software program ■ Coaching through a technical problem
Family member or professional acquaintance	Role modeling	■ Observation in work settings ■ Conversations about career direction

Benefits of Mentoring

I titled this article "A Learning Collaboration" because the research shows that mentoring benefits both parties in the relationship. The mentor receives help and direction, but the mentor also benefits. Many mentors report that mentoring fulfills their desire to leave a legacy. They enjoy the respect that a mentee can give them and relish the opportunity to influence those who will carry on in the profession.

Sometimes the benefit can come from reverse mentoring, where a senior person trades expertise for expertise, such as a senior's view of organizational politics traded for help learning a technical program. The benefits can also flow the other direction, with a younger professional offering to help a senior professional learn more about their generation and a senior professional agreeing to sponsor the junior professional within the organization. The most current research on mentoring presents a model of mentoring as a collaboration where both partners learn from and find value in the relationship.

What Can Organizations Do to Promote Mentoring?

Mentoring programs are common in both the private and public sectors. Most of these programs have the goal of employee development and assisting new employees with learning the particular organizational culture. Three

approaches are common: (1) one-to-one matching programs, (2) group mentoring, and (3) training and encouragement toward mentoring.

One-to-one matching programs are generally operated centrally by a human resource professional or a committee formed for that function. Generally mentees are identified by the organization and assigned a mentor. Often these programs focus on a specific career-development goal, such as the achievement of tenure for a faculty member or the development of managerial skills to move up in the organization.

While these programs have shown some success, this model has a few disadvantages. First, because someone else is matching the individuals, there is greater risk that the individuals will not develop a strong relationship. Programs where the individuals chose each other have been shown to form more successful relationships. Second, these programs often focus on moving employees toward the organization's goals, which may or may not be consistent with the employee's needs. Third, these programs require a numerical match of one mentor to one mentee. This is often hard to achieve given the responsibilities of senior members of the organization and the number of employees who need mentoring. This issue can be overcome with group mentoring.

In group mentoring, a number of mentees are brought together with a few mentors. The group meets on a regular basis and jointly chooses topics relevant to the mentees. This group setting allows mentees to gain insight from more than one mentor, in addition to receiving peer mentoring from the other mentees.

Group mentoring increases the diversity of the mentoring network. Because the mentees normally set the agenda for the group, the group approach can have the advantage of better suiting their needs but is perhaps less tailored to individual needs compared to a one-to-one relationship. A critical factor in group mentoring is the trust built among group members. Normally this requires a strong confidentiality bond and "leaving status at the door." The ability to provide this type of environment is affected by the size of the group, which normally cannot exceed 15 members, both mentees and mentors.

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Recently, more organizations have recognized the limitations of top-down organized mentoring programs and have instead infused mentoring into the organization. With this kind of program, mentor training is offered to employees. Then supervisors and their employees are encouraged to take the initiative to incorporate mentoring into the employee's career development plan. These programs place the responsibility for mentoring with the employee and the responsibility for assistance with the supervisor. They have the advantage of tailoring the mentoring program to individuals and allowing multiple mentoring relationships for those individuals as needed. Because they are ad hoc, they have at least two disadvantages: (1) some individuals with unique skills or insights might be sought as a mentor by more individuals than they have time to work with effectively, and (2) it is harder to track the program outcomes and demonstrate its value to the organization.

Examples of all three types of programs can be found in the EDUCAUSE Mentoring Information Kit.[7]

Conclusion

Mentoring has shifted from a focus on senior professionals advising junior professionals to professionals at any level identifying their own needs and reaching out to gain assistance with them. This is a fundamental shift that squarely places the responsibility on the mentees. Defining needs through the development of a career plan provides a basis for appropriate mentoring relationships for the mentee. The concept of the developmental network has promise for a new way of looking at mentoring, helping the mentee define needs and fulfill them through a diversified set of individuals. This kind of mentoring outreach promises to provide significant career advancement for professionals no matter what the aim of their careers. *e*

Endnotes

1. T. A. Scandura and R. E Viator, "Mentoring in Public Accounting Firms—An Analysis of Mentor-Protégé Relationships, Mentorship Functions, and Protégé Turnover Intentions," *Accounting Organizations and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 8, 1994, pp. 717–734.
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3. L. Waters, "Protégé-Mentor Agreement About the Provision of Psychosocial Support: The Mentoring Relationship, Personality, and Workload," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2004, pp. 519–532.
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6. S. E. Metros and C. Yang, "The Importance of Mentors," in *Cultivating Careers*, C. Golden, ed. (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE, 2006), <http://www.educause.edu/10631>.
7. Find advice on mentoring and example mentoring programs on the EDUCAUSE Web site at <http://www.educause.edu/mentoring/>.

Marilu Goodyear (goodyear@ku.edu) is Associate Professor of Public Administration at the University of Kansas, Overland Park. During the past year she served as a consultant to EDUCAUSE in the professional development area.