

The Rewards of Mentoring

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“A stream cannot rise higher than its source”.

Anna J. Cooper

A growing body of knowledge exists which describes the rewards and importance of mentors in the professional development of young men and women, particularly with relation to their interactions in professional and organizational settings. Research in both educational settings and the workplace indicates that students and employees alike are more likely to succeed, if they have had a mentor. Mentoring programs are seen to bridge the gap between professional post-secondary programs and the independent exercise of professional roles, adopted in many organizations as a human resource strategy to improve personnel training at all organizational levels, from orientation of incoming personnel to more advanced preparation for those ascending higher levels of the organizational ladder. The purpose of this research is to discuss the many rewards of mentoring experiences to include not only the rewards to the mentor, but also the mentee/protégé, and the organization, as well.

Keywords: mentoring, protégé, mentee, mentor, role model, mentoring experience

Introduction

History and legend record the deeds of princes and kings, but each of us has a birthright to be all that we can be. Mentors are those special people in our lives who, through their deeds and work, help us move toward fulfilling that potential (Shea, 1997).

No matter where you are in your career, it is likely that you have had a mentor, whether a supervisor or more experienced coworker, or a professor or high school teacher, who has guided and encouraged you to follow your interests. In fact, you may still have mentors among your peers, who offer to advise and inform you.

Even though the idea of having a mentor or being a mentor has become very popular these days, information presented in the literature on the definition of mentoring and research does not indicate a single definition of mentoring. Most of the definitions of mentoring include the function of mentors. That is, how mentoring is defined determines the extent of the mentoring found.

“Mentoring is when a role model, or mentor, offers support to another person. A mentor has knowledge and experience in an area and shares it with the person being mentored” (McBrien & Brandt, 1997, p. 64). Another definition includes mentoring as a fundamental form of human development where one person invests time, energy and personal know-how in assisting the growth and ability of another person. Further, broadly defined, mentoring is a sustained one-to-one relationship between a caring adult and a child who needs support to achieve academic, career, social or personal goals (McPartland & Sandra, 1991, p. 568).

While many of us use the term “mentor” quite often, very few know the true model for its use. The term “mentor” and the model for its use originated in Greek mythology. When Odysseus went off to the Trojan War, he charged his household manager, mentor, with the development of his son, Telemachus. After the war, Odysseus was condemned to wander vainly for 10 years with his attempt to return home. In time, when he became an adult, Telemachus went in search of his father. He was accompanied on his quest by Athena, Goddess of War and patroness of the arts and industry, who assumed the form of mentor.

The first mentor was an older, more experienced and trusted individual who took an active interest in developing a younger person in every facet of his/her life and career. Thus, the first mentor/protégé relationships had high levels of mutual respect and trust and affection, all of which contributed to the mutual commitment of the relationship.

From the legacy of famous mentoring relationships comes the sense of mentoring as a powerful emotional interaction between an older and younger person, a relationship in which the older member is trusted, loved and experienced in the guidance of the younger. A mentor helps shape the growth and development of the protégé. Many of our great leaders participated in a mentor/protégé relationship: Socrates and Plato, Freud and Jung, Boas and Mead, Sartre and de Beauvoir, Hayden and Beethoven, and so on.

The terms “mentor” and “sponsor” are often used interchangeably to indicate older people in an organization or profession who take younger colleagues under their wings and encourage and support their personal development until they reach mid-life. The term “sponsor” was in vogue in the 1960s and into the 1970s, and then appeared to have dropped from use or became an alternate term for the newly popular term “mentor”.

A growing body of knowledge exists which describes the importance of mentors in the professional development of young men and women, particularly with relation to their interactions in professional and organizational settings. The relationship is so important that some researches suggested that the total absence of a mentor in young adulthood is associated with an existential vacuum in clients and a neurotic fear for meaning in life. In a psychodynamic sense, a mentor is not a teacher or, guide, but a person who stands in a social archetypal relationship to another and who offers peership, friendship and the opportunity to creatively perform together.

Mentoring is actional, operational and pragmatic. It is always in some way connected with work and love.

An association of training and development specialists called the Woodlands Group (1980), described mentors as having genuine generosity, compassion and concern. Mentoring is that when a role model, or mentor, offers support to another person. A mentor has knowledge and experience in an area and shares it with the person being mentored. According to the woodlands group, caring is the core of the mentoring relationship wherein protégés care because of the help received, and mentors care more about the needs of the protégés than about the needs of the organization. In addition, the protégés are the ones who are in control of the relationship, because the wisdom can be imparted only when receivers seek it or are willing to listen.

Mentors must look inside themselves and find the best parts of their heart, soul and mind and make the choice to share who they are with others (Dortch, 2000).

Role, Function and Importance of Mentors

Mentoring has grown rapidly in the last 20 years. From teacher education to aerospace and financial firms to community foundations, mentoring relationships are wide-spread and have a variety of purposes and

importance. Studies show the crucial influence of mentors in shaping both the personal lives and professional careers of the old and young. The relationship which evolves between mentor and protégé can be exceedingly complex, since the types of assistance identified above may be provided separately or in a multitude of differing combinations. For these reasons, it is important to focus on the functions actually served by the relationship between mentor and protégé. Another complicating factor is the time period for mentor/protégé relationships, which can last from two to 10 years and sometimes longer. During this period of time, the interactions between mentor and protégé may undergo a number of changes. For these reasons, it is important to focus on the functions actually served by the relationship between mentor and protégé (Levinson, 1978). Mentors open doors for, promote, cut red tape for, show the politics and subtleties of the job to and believe in protégés, thus, helping them to succeed (Schmidt & Wolfe, 1980).

The role that the mentor plays in facilitating career development is described in many ways in the literature. While many terms are used to describe a mentor, such as rabbi, godfather, teacher, coach, counselor, guide, sponsor or role model, the essence of mentor is described by Bova and Philips (1992) in their study of mentors and the educational experience, as those who practice these principles: (1) try to understand, shape and encourage the dreams of their protégés; (2) often give their blessing on the dreams and goals of their protégés; (3) provide opportunities for their protégés to observe and participate in their work by inviting their protégés to work with them; and (4) teach their protégés the politesse of getting ahead in the organization.

The role, function and importance of a mentor can be summarized into three major categories: (1) emotional support and encouragement; (2) teaching and guiding; and (3) practical help.

Current research indicates that the two types of mentoring are natural mentoring and planned mentoring. Planned mentoring occurs within a structured environment or program in which voluntary participants are screened and matched through a formal application process. In contrast, natural mentoring occurs through friendship and collegiality, teaching, coaching and counseling—more of a self-selection process. Although the mentor may serve as a teacher and sponsor, the mentor's primary function is to assist the protégé, also known in the research as "mentee", in realizing his/her potential.

The Rewards of Mentoring

The number of mentoring programs has grown dramatically in recent years. This popularity results, in part, from compelling testimonials by people—youth and adults alike—who have themselves benefited from the positive influence of an older person who helped them endure social, academic, career or personal crises.

If the mentor/protégé relationship has been rewarding to both parties, a long-term friendship may develop. However, the contact and involvement may not be as frequent. The protégé may internalize the admired qualities of the mentor more fully, thereby enriching himself/herself, and because mentoring is a two-way relationship in which individuals share stories, experiences and ideas, there are rewards for the protégé as well. Observing a person grow and learn is an affirmation of the mentor's efforts. Thus, the special bond that develops between mentor and protégé can develop into a career-long friendship. Connections forged through mentoring open the doors to greater opportunities. Although affirmative action laws were put in place to address inequities in the workplace, they do not provide any mechanism for enabling African Americans to ascend up the corporate ladder. Therefore, most successful African American professionals can attribute much of their achievement to their mentoring relationships.

Further, just as individuals, organizations of any size can enjoy the rewards of mentoring. The quality and

quantity of projects and work-related initiatives are directly related to the ability of the organization's people to work together to surpass their expectations. Nurturing and collaborating through mentoring can only enhance the organization's work. As a corollary benefit, people who feel better about themselves and their work will make a better impression on customers/clients. Customers/clients see the positive interactions and, in turn, feel better about the organization's work.

Rewards of Mentoring for African Americans and Other Minorities

Several disciplines have researched the rewards and benefits of mentoring for African Americans. The most notable are the areas of business and education (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2002; Dreher & Cox, 1996, Lee, 1999; Leveinson, 1978, Thomas, 1990; Zen, 1994).

The question of whether same-race mentoring is better than cross-race relationships is still being debated. Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2002) acknowledged the benefits that mentoring can have for improving the doctoral level experience for minority students. They suggested that in academia, "Students of color need mentors that are effective and influential in the department, regardless of racial background" (p. 553). Recommendations from this study include recognition of differences, such as race/ethnicity between mentor and protégé for cross-race relationships and multicultural competence for the faculty.

Studies of African American executives showed a direct correlation among job growth, promotions and salary increases and having mentors:

(1) According to Korn/Ferry International's study (1998), "Diversity in the Executive Suite: Creating Successful Career Paths and Strategies", formal and informal mentoring and support from superiors and coworkers are key factors that help place minority executives on the organizational fast track;

(2) Korn/Ferry International's study also shows that African American executives who reported having informal mentors at work (73%) had faster salary and total compensation growth than those without one. The study also shows that 69% of those with mentors were promoted, compared with 50% of those with no mentors.

A Factor in Promotions

The results of having a mentor/mentee can be impressive. A survey of 368 women of color by Catalyst, a nonprofit research organization in New York found that 69% of respondents who had a mentor in 1998 had at least one upward career move by 2001 compared to 49% of those who did not have a mentor. More than half the respondents were African American. Yet, women and minority professionals have more trouble finding informal sponsors than their mainstream counterparts. According to the research of Dr. Marcia Kropf (2004) vice president, research and information services, for Catalyst, people are naturally drawn to those who look like them and have backgrounds like them, so informal mentoring tends to exclude people who are outside the culture.

Additionally, the experiences of African American managers with mentoring and sponsorship suggest that it is more difficult for them to get mentors and build the type of developmental relationships necessary for long-term career development. A survey of 397 members of the National Black MBA Association conducted by Raymond Friedman and Donna Carter in 1993, found that 53% felt that they did not have the support of a mentor. Another study of 729 African American and white MBAs also found that African Americans reported significantly less mentoring assistance than whites. Limited access to mentoring puts African Americans at a

disadvantage in terms of skill development, promotion opportunities and career satisfaction. They do not receive the grooming they need to assume top positions.

Even when African Americans gain access to mentors, there are a number of racial dynamics that affect the quality and benefits of the relationship. Thomas's (1990) study of developmental relationships of African American and white managers in a major public utility company provided a number of insights about the cross-race and cross-gender dynamics that occur in such relationships. He found that African American men and women had a majority of their mentoring relationships with white men. This finding is not surprising since white males dominate upper management positions in most organizations. Thus, gender seems to be an easier barrier to negotiate than race. Yet, these cross-race relationships provided less psychosocial support compared to same-race relationships. As Thomas concluded, "The difficulty in developing the psychosocial support aspect of cross-racial relationships most likely contributes to and is caused by the lack of comfort that white and black managers feel with each other".

The long-term result may be that African American managers are not given difficult and important assignments of the type that lead to high visibility and advancement, because such assignments create risk to the mentor. To find psychosocial and emotional support, African American managers must venture beyond their departmental and hierarchical boundaries to establish relationships with other African Americans. In fact, Thomas's (1990) research showed that African American men and women formed relationships with other African American men and women in numbers that exceeded their proportional representation in the management workforce in the company.

Therefore, because of their small numbers in organizations, senior African American managers have to assume an extraordinary burden when mentoring their junior colleagues.

Research on organizations has long documented the importance of mentoring in the development of top-level managers. Mentor/mentee relationships provide budding managers with information instrumental to career advancement and also provide "psychosocial support". A major element of the classic mentor/protégé relationship is a high level of rapport and interpersonal chemistry. Also, research indicates that mentors and sponsors are more likely to choose mentees who are more similar to them in terms of race and gender. To the extent that mentors tend to avoid risk in selecting protégés, the stereotypes of African Americans as incompetent pose a substantial barrier to their selection as mentees.

Rewards to Mentee/Protégé

The rewards to mentee/protégé are as follows:

- (1) Development of an interpersonal relationship with a caring, informed and supportive advisor;
- (2) Providing role modeling for professional leadership and facilitating the development of increased competencies and stronger interpersonal skills;
- (3) Direction in defining and achieving career goals;
- (4) Increasing the self-confidence of new professionals as her/she becomes familiar with a new role, increased responsibilities, or a new organizational culture;
- (5) Challenging the mentees/protégés to go further, take risks, set new goals and achieve at higher personal and/or professional standards;
- (6) Providing a forum to dialogue on professional issues and seek and receive advice on how to balance new responsibilities.

Rewards to Mentors

The rewards to mentors are as follows:

- (1) Enhancing the leadership, teaching and coaching skills of mentors and encouraging them to become more reflective practitioners;
- (2) A sense of pride from observing the mentee/protégé develop;
- (3) An opportunity to improve interpersonal communication, motivation, coaching, counseling and leadership skills;
- (4) Pleasure in contributing to the success of the organization;
- (5) An opportunity to impart valuable information, expertise and wisdom to a receptive individual;
- (6) Creating opportunities for experienced professionals to strengthen their knowledge base and improving communication skills;
- (7) Creating new support networks with other professionals in the field and promoting greater collegiality among professionals within and across institutions.

Rewards to the Organization

The rewards to the organization are as follows:

- (1) Contributing to a positive organizational climate and promoting a more clear understanding of professional responsibilities and expectations;
- (2) Increasing employee satisfaction and retention by reducing a new employee's sense of isolation;
- (3) Resulting in improved employee job performance, contributing to faster learning curves and resulting in a better trained staff;
- (4) Reflecting an investment in employee development and may increase employee commitment and loyalty;
- (5) Promoting a positive image of the organization and reflects employee-centered values;
- (6) Contributing to the development of partnerships or allies that may be useful to the organization in the future;
- (7) Effective mentoring that can be one of the best tools for building diversity;

The rewards gained by constantly working to develop these relationships, which are invaluable and can ultimately lead to career success.

Conclusions

The research is clear: Mentoring is a fundamental form of human development where one person invests time, energy and personal know-how in assisting the growth and ability of another person. Mentoring is a journey mentors and mentees embark on together. Throughout this journey, two or more individuals help each other arrive at a common destination. Mentoring activities have been shown to provide both developmental (academic) and psychosocial (e.g., friendship, role-modelling, counselling and acceptance) functions for mentees/protégés.

Mentors set high expectations of performance, offer challenging ideas and help build self-confidence. Mentors encourage professional behavior, offer friendship and confront negative behaviors and attitudes. Mentors listen to personal problems, teach by example and provide growth experiences. Mentors explain how the organization works, coach their mentees/protégés and stand by and offer support in critical situations.

Mentors offer wise counsel, encourage winning behavior, trigger self-awareness and inspire their protégés. Mentors share critical knowledge, offer encouragement and assist with career development.

Mentoring is critical to a professional's career at any level. Studies confirm that a mentor/mentee relationship is significantly connected to career success and satisfaction, whether the protégé/mentee is just beginning or already a seasoned veteran. Research in the mentoring literature demonstrates that all concerned parties gain from participating in mentoring relationships: mentors, protégé/mentees and organizations. The benefits and rewards of mentoring to the mentee are evident—a brighter future, career direction and promotions, being mentored have been linked with high academic and professional achievement. Mentees/Protégés gain an increased understanding of a discipline or an organization, receive guidance and advice, and report higher confidence levels and gain access to new networks and other resources. Mentors also reap benefits and appreciate the opportunity for self-reflection about their own career paths—they report gaining an increased understanding of their disciplines. Most widely, mentors report the intrinsic rewards for being involved in helping others. They mentor as a way to show appreciation for the mentoring they received as students or new professionals.

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