

# Rising With the Tide: Applying *Adaptive Mentorship* in the Professional Practicum

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*The Adaptive Mentorship (AM) model (formerly called Contextual Supervision) is described and implications are raised for its wider implementation. The researchers derived the AM model from earlier contingency leadership approaches, and during the last two decades, have further refined it. They argue for the transferability of AM, because it may be adapted by mentors in any field to assist protégés in developing professional proficiency in their respective contexts.*

*Adaptive Mentorship* (AM) is a promising model that has proven effective in enhancing the mentorship/supervisory process. We believe that AM (which we formerly called *Contextual Supervision*) is worthy of consideration for application in *any* mentorship situation in *any* field (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008a, 2008b). Our reasons for disseminating AM are: (1) the call in the research for better mentorship preparation (Allen & Eby, 2007; Myall, Levett-Jones, & Lathlean, 2008); (2) our own research regarding ongoing weaknesses in mentorship programs (Ralph, 1994; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007, 2009); (3) the published endorsement by one of North America's most prominent management/leadership educators, Dr. Barry Posner (2004); (4) the

current initiative of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2006), which has identified the need for professional schools to improve clinical/practical/apprenticeship learning opportunities; (5) our receipt of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Public-Outreach Grant to disseminate AM widely (Ralph & Walker, 2009); and (6) our belief that the mentorship process should be less "mentor-centric."

## The AM Model

AM requires mentors to adjust their helping behaviour in response to the task-specific development

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needs of their protégés. We represent the AM model in Figure 1.

The outer border of the diagram represents the context of the mentorship relationship that includes psychological, social, organizational, and cultural factors within the practicum/work setting, many of which are unchangeable by the mentor or the protégé. Mentors, however, can change the two dimensions of their mentoring behaviour, shown in the A-grid: their adaptive *task* response (i.e., the degree of direction regarding the technical, mechanical, or procedural aspect of the protégé's performance), and their adaptive *support* response (i.e., the degree of expression regarding the "human" or psycho/social/emotional aspect of the protégé's learning).

The key element that protégés can modify is their developmental level in performing particular skill-sets, which consists of two dimensions in the D-grid: their developmental *competence* level (i.e., their ability to perform the task), and their developmental *confidence* level (i.e., their degree of self-assurance,

composure, and feeling of security and/or safety in performing it). The heart of the AM model is represented by the arrows linking the D-quadrants with the A-quadrants, which portray the mentor's matching one of four adaptive "A" responses with a similarly numbered "D" developmental-level exhibited by the protégé in his/her skill-specific performance.

## Applying the AM Model

The application of AM consists of three phases.

### 1) Determine development level

The first phase is for the pair to determine the existing development level of the protégé to accomplish the specific competency being practiced at the time. As illustrated in the D-grid of Figure 1, a protégé's skill-specific level of development consists of both his/her *competence* and his/her *confidence* levels in ex-

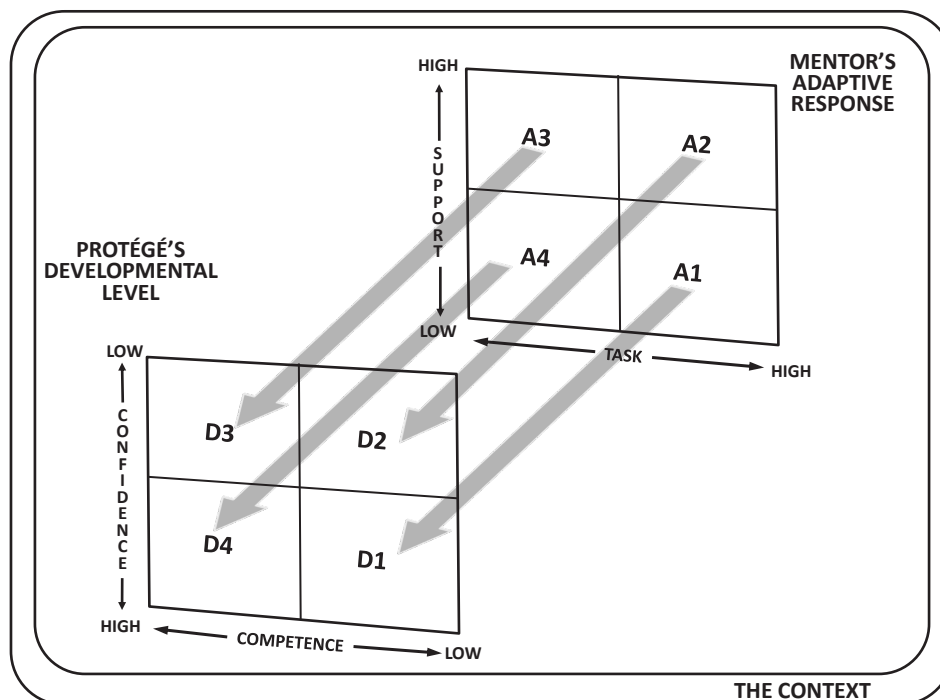


FIGURE 1  
*Adaptive Mentorship Model*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The mentor matches his/her adaptive response to coincide with the skill-specific developmental level of his/her protégé.

ecuting that task. The D1 quadrant reflects an individual with “low competence” and “high confidence” to accomplish the task (i.e., he/she does not know exactly *how* to perform it, but is confident, willing, and eager to do so). A protégé at D2 is low on both the competence and confidence dimensions; a learner at D3 shows high competence and low confidence; while a protégé at D4 is high on both.

A mentee’s developmental level may be ascertained in three ways: (1) by the pair’s observations of the novice’s task-specific performance; (2) by the pair’s informal conversations about the protégé’s progress; and (3) by the protégé’s answers to the mentor’s direct questions regarding his/her performance.

These D-levels are skill-set specific, changeable over-time, different for each competency, and not permanent (Ralph, 1998, 2000).

## 2) Synchronize mentor response

After determining the protégé’s competency-specific level of performance, the mentor must appropriately adapt his/her mentorship response to correspond to the existing developmental level of the mentee.

As depicted in Figure 1, the mentor’s adaptive response also has two dimensions: the degree of *support* the mentor provides (i.e., the human-relationship aspects of encouragement, positive reinforcement, praise, and psychological/emotional bolstering of the protégé as he/she learns). This support consists of positive words, facial expressions, gestures, and body language. The other response-element is the *task* dimension (i.e., instruction regarding the technical or mechanical skill, in which the mentor provides procedural directions to the protégé). This task-dimension would involve varied degrees of telling, showing, guiding, demonstrating, advising, directing, or strategizing regarding the protégé’s “technique.” *Task* can also broaden *and* deepen protégés’ holistic understanding of professional identity and attending social, ethical, and moral responsibilities. For example, a mentor’s provision of specific directions to the protégé regarding proper conduct and precise protocol in a particular setting illustrates how the latter becomes professionalized into the expected role and department of practitioners in the field.

Two key principles in matching the A and

D quadrants is that the mentor’s *task* response must be *inverse in magnitude* to the extent of the protégé’s *competence* level; and simultaneously, the extent of the mentor’s *support* is similarly *inversely proportional* to the novice’s level of confidence. In short, the degree of mentor response is opposite to that of protégé development.

## 3) Adapt mentor response

The mentorship pair would continually observe the protégé’s changing developmental level, and the mentor would synchronize his/her adaptive response to match, in *inverse* proportions, the mentee’s changing development level. As a protégé advances from D1 to D2 to D3 to D4, the mentor would *reciprocate* by responding correspondingly with A1, A2, A3, and A4 adaptations.

## A Specific Example

A brief illustration of how the AM model might function in a nursing preceptorship would be when the mentor observes a nursing student’s performance and deportment in administering health care in a hospital emergency room. If the protégé consistently: exhibits a calm and controlled presence under the pressures of that environment; demonstrates a characteristically pleasant and positive demeanor in dealing with patients, patients’ family members, and the protégé’s professional colleagues; and administers required medical procedures and interventions with accuracy and efficiency, then the protégé would be reflecting a D4 level for that particular skill set (i.e., displaying high competence and confidence). The preceptor would consequently match this protégé’s high performance with an A4 response (i.e., with lower levels of task direction and support), because the protégé would not require the preceptor to provide excessive amounts of procedural direction or emotional support for these tasks.

## AM Research Findings

Much of the previous research on AM was conducted

with pre-service teachers and their mentors, but some was conducted in early childhood education (Watt, 1998), agricultural education (Fritz & Miller, 2003, 2004), and business management (Posner, 2004). Over the past two decades, we have applied, researched, re-adjusted, refined, and re-applied the AM model, and reported the ongoing results, regarding teacher-candidates (Ralph, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005; Ralph & Yang, 1993), and novice post-secondary instructors (Ralph, 1995; Ralph & Konchak, 1996).

## Data collection

During these studies we collected survey data by having each individual first indicate on independent copies of the D-grids, the quadrant in which they felt the protégé was located at that point in time. After each partner independently completed his/her plottings, the pair discussed their D choices and rationales.

Next, partners independently marked on their respective A-grid sheets the quadrant in which they thought the mentor was performing with respect to his/her adaptive response in helping the protégé master the competency in question. They subsequently discussed these A-grid markings, as well as the overall similarities and differences between their respective A and D rankings. We collected each pair's four grid-forms and analyzed the data, in order to determine the degree that mentors synchronized their leadership responses to match the existing task-specific developmental level of their protégés.

Much of our research focused on the mentorship relationship related to teacher candidates' competencies in *classroom management/organization* and *oral questioning*, two skill-sets long considered to be essential to effective teaching that promotes pupils' learning (Kasin Lemlech, 2010). We then collated all of these data with respect to the total number of individuals whose plottings of their own positions and those of their partners matched similar quadrants (e.g., A1 with D1, or A2 with D2, and so on).

The findings revealed that: (1) a mentor who adjusted her/his adaptive response to match the protégé's changing developmental levels enhanced the protégé's professional growth in these skills; (2) interpersonal problems typically arose when mismatch-

ing of mentor response and protégé development occurred; and (3) these conflicts tended to subside, if this misalignment was corrected by the mentor realigning his/her adaptive response with the corresponding development level of the mentee.

One lingering problem that was identified in our AM research was that even when mentor pairs were acquainted with the model, a small percentage of them still had difficulty in reaching agreement identifying protégés' actual developmental levels and/or mentors' matching response level.

To attempt to reduce this mismatching gap, we subsequently made two changes in subsequent mentorship procedures: we increased the length of workshop time devoted to the model, and we made more references to it whenever an opportunity arose to do so during the regular internship activities. These changes appeared to reduce the mismatching gap (Ralph, 2004, 2005).

## Discussion

The research results identified AM's strengths: (1) it helped mentors clarify their conceptualization of the whole mentorship process; (2) it replaced a "one-size-fits-all" approach by allowing mentors to adapt their behaviour according to the developmental needs of their protégés; (3) it was intuitively appealing and relatively easy to learn; (4) it offered mentors a tool to help analyze and alleviate mentoring conflicts; and (5) it revealed that such relationship problems were often the result of mentors mismatching their adaptive responses with protégés' developmental level.

With respect to the mismatching phenomenon, there was less mismatching regarding the protégés' D-levels than there was regarding the mentors' A-responses. A possible reason for this discrepancy was that both sub-groups were typically more familiar with the concepts related to teaching/learning than they were with the relatively new procedures related to AM, with which they had just become acquainted. Hence, participants may have been uncertain about their A-grid rankings.

Furthermore, some protégés ranked themselves differently on the D-scale than did their men-

tors. An explanation for this mismatching aspect may relate to the differences between experts and novices, whereby experts focus more on a sophisticated and holistic picture of the teaching/learning process, while novices tend to be more idealistic, positive, and narrow in their perspective (Shulman, 1987; Veenman, 1984). The issue at the root of this inconsistency is that pairs need to observe the degree of task-specific confidence and competence possessed by the protégé, and that the mentor must reciprocate with inverse proportions of supportive and task response.

## Conclusion

The data we have collected to date suggest that the AM model is useful, but that mentors need to be well versed in its application. Future studies could be replicated with mentor/protégé cohorts from other professions using the AM model. We hereby invite interested practitioners and researchers to apply it in their respective mentorship/supervisory settings, record/analyze the results, and disseminate their findings. As a result, the research-base of AM could be expanded, and its potential for enhancing mentorship in all fields could be further developed.

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## Authors' Notes

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