

Mentorship Theory And Current Practice: A Study Of Executives In The Greater Denver Region

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Abstract

Mentoring is increasingly seen as a critical skill for modern business. It builds on a team concept that represents a win-win situation for the organization as a whole, for the mentor, and for the mentee. Mentoring focuses on work-related needs of the company while building the skills of individual employees. Our study incorporates an extensive literature review on best practices in mentoring, along with the results from interviews with 395 business executives in the Denver region. The discussion builds on a series of interviews conducted between 1998 and 2001 with executives who have had served as a mentor for at least one mentee.

In examining mentorship theory and practice, we will focus initially on the challenge and expectations of mentoring programs within organizations, and how specific organizations face these issues. We will next consider the purpose of a mentoring program, looking at the objectives of the organization as well as of the various individual participants. The method for mentorship practice includes program dimensions such as the size, levels of formality, attitudes of those involved, and the various mentorship roles. Finally, we report how the mentee participants rated their experience.

1. Challenge/Expectations for Mentoring

The mentoring process helps junior employees learn both procedures and the nuances of effective functioning within the larger organization. The term “mentor” actually comes from the Homer’s *Odyssey*. Telemachus, the son of the title’s hero (Odysseus in Greek, or Ulysses in Latin), begins to act on his own, helped by an advisor, named Mentor. At times in the story, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, assumes the form of Mentor to help Telemachus. This helping role of has evolved into the function of “mentor,” one who helps junior employees. As described by Bard and Moore, “Mentoring is confidential, one-to-one relationship in which an individual uses a more experienced, usually more senior, person as a sounding board and for guidance” (Bard & Moore, 2000, p.256). In particular, mentoring “enables the more seasoned professional to share their expertise with neophytes who are thrown into a lot of tough situations” (O’ Briant, 1999, p. 22).

2. Scope of the Program

Mentoring applies to companies of all sizes. Larger companies tend to have a more formal program, with specific individuals identified to help newcomers enhance their skills. In smaller companies, CEO’s and senior executives tend to take on the mentorship roles. Our study of mentors in Metropolitan Denver found 58% of participants are from smaller companies, those having 50 or fewer employees. The company size appears in Table 1.

Readers with comments and questions are encouraged to contact the authors via email.

Table 1: Size of Companies

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
< 50	173	58.8	58.8
50-	26	8.8	67.6
150-	43	14.6	82.2
500-	16	5.5	87.7
1000-	16	5.5	93.2
>500	20	6.8	100
Total	294	100	

3. Expected Benefit

Mentoring concerns both individuals and organizations. For individuals, “Mentoring is about achieving personal growth and development” (Bard and Moore, 2000, p. 256). Individual companies use mentoring to fill their long-term positions with qualified applicants. In doing so, companies recognize that they no longer work in a world where supply of qualified applicants exceeds the demand; rather, they must seek out and retain qualified applicants from a more limited pool. As mentioned in *Harvard Business Review*, “In this era of talent wars, partners at professional firms can no longer afford to have a survival of the fittest mind-set toward the consultants, investment bankers, and junior accountants aspiring to join their ranks” (Ibarra, 2000, p. 147).

Mentoring programs meet multiple needs of individuals, companies, and the wider community. According to Van Eck, “Mentoring has received considerable attention in organizational literature in the United States over the past two decades, primarily because of its linkage to both job and career success” (Van Eck, 2000, p. 549). Corporate success requires attention to the changing nature of the job market as well. As James Hayes indicates, “We want business to view the next generation as part of their responsibility! From the board rooms of the nation’s largest corporations to the back rooms of main street’s smallest businesses...from General Motors to the General Store...we want to create an atmosphere . . . that encourages mentoring...” (Hayes, 1995, p. 401) In our survey of managers, corporate needs were the dominant reason for developing programs, with the needs of the individual ranking second (See Table 2).

Table 2: Expected Extent of Benefits

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Individual	7	1.8	1.8
Organization	369	97.9	99.7
Society	1	.3	100
Total	377	100.0	

4. Mentoring Purpose

Mentoring serves purposes for both the organization and for the individual. As a result, a mentoring program must focus on differing groups: retaining employees within an organization, and attracting potential employees through relationships with schools, colleges and universities.

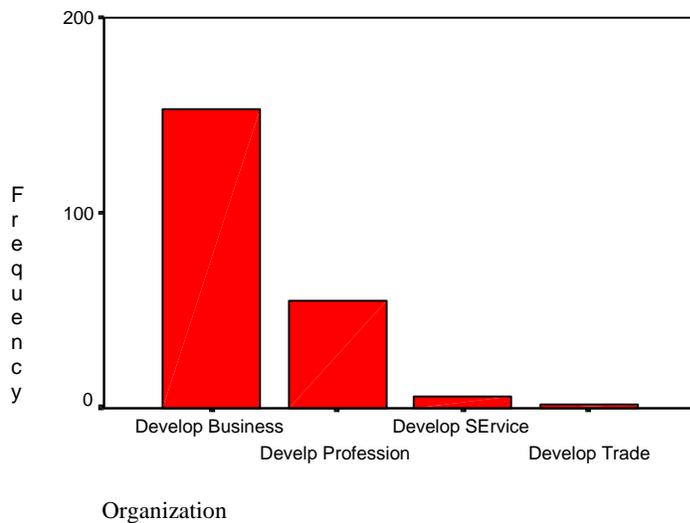
5. Mentoring Goals

Mentoring involves individuals, the mentor and the mentee, who have related but differing goals. Organizations that succeed with mentoring recognize that they can best meet their own needs through meeting the needs of the individuals involved. As mentioned in *Employee Counseling Today*, “Many organizations today view mentoring as a valuable method of supporting individuals” (Bloch, 1993, p. 9). Companies that support and develop employees have a greater likelihood of retaining their best people, thus meeting corporate needs through meeting the needs of the employees.

But organizations cannot begin work with mentoring just because it seems to be “the latest” or “the in thing” to do. Rather, company managers must know what they “want to achieve from a mentoring relationship—and manage it” (Hayes, Kristy, 1998, p. 63). In particular, organizations must “have solid business reasons, such as to speed up the development of future leaders or to share organizational knowledge” (Lindenberger, Lois, 1999, p. 12).

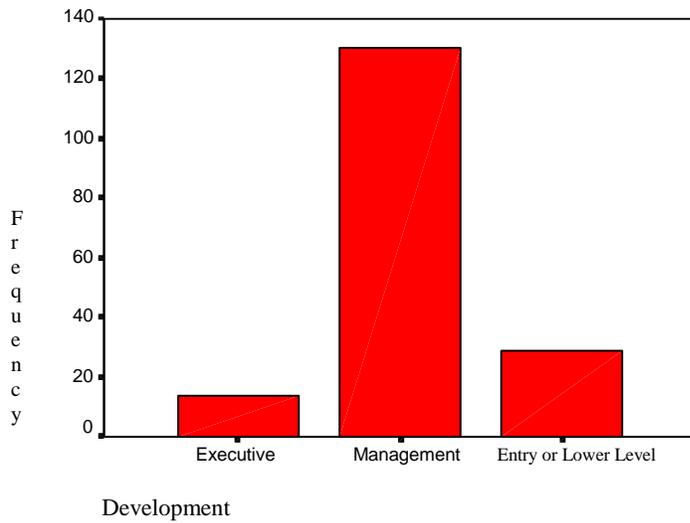
In our survey findings, the executives described the focus on developing their own business primarily, and secondarily developing their own profession. Figure 1 describes these findings.

Figure 1: Organization Audience



To meet their particular goals, companies target mentorship for executive levels, for management levels, for professional development, or for entry level into the organization. Figure 2 describes the findings based on interviews in Metropolitan Denver.

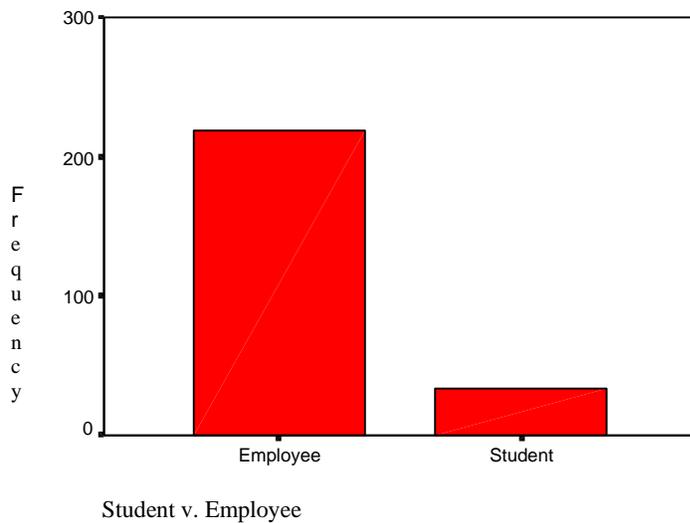
Figure 2: Developmental Emphasis



6. Mentoring Audiences

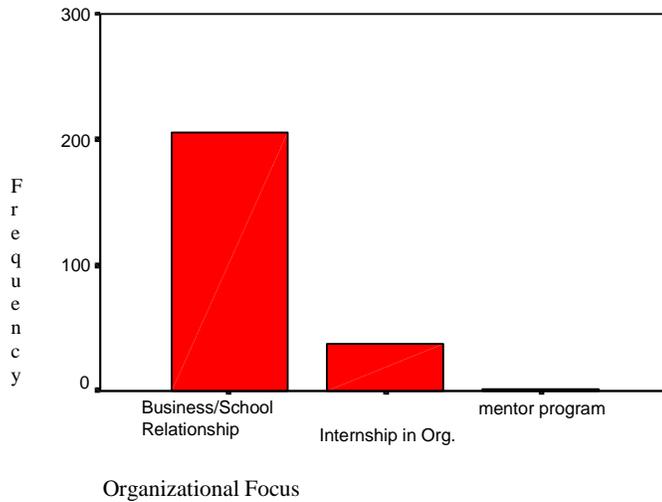
The audience for mentoring programs includes experienced employees who serve as mentors, along with the actual mentees whom they serve. But the participants may be either employees already in the organization or students who may become future employees. Mentorship can even provide a way for companies to serve a vital role within the community. As James Hayes advocates, “We want a business community culture that recognizes and rewards meaningful involvement with our young people!” (Hayes, 1995, p. 401). The experience from our study shows that the majority of participants are actual employees, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Employee vs. Student Participation



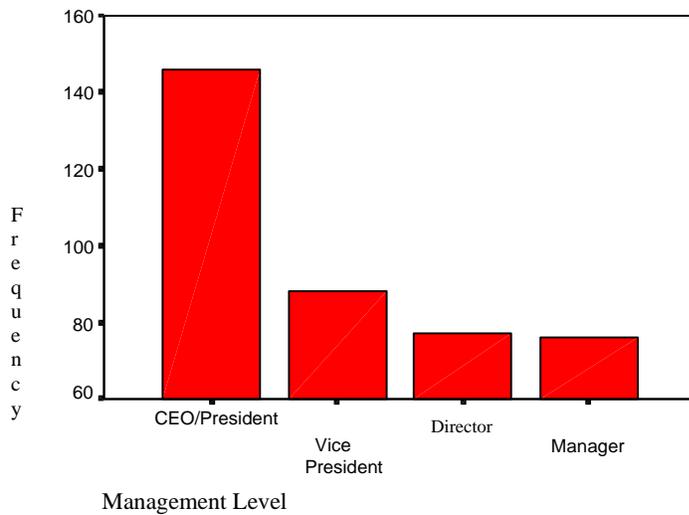
In addition, for organizations that use students in mentoring programs, the organizational focus serves to enhance business-school relations, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Organizational Focus



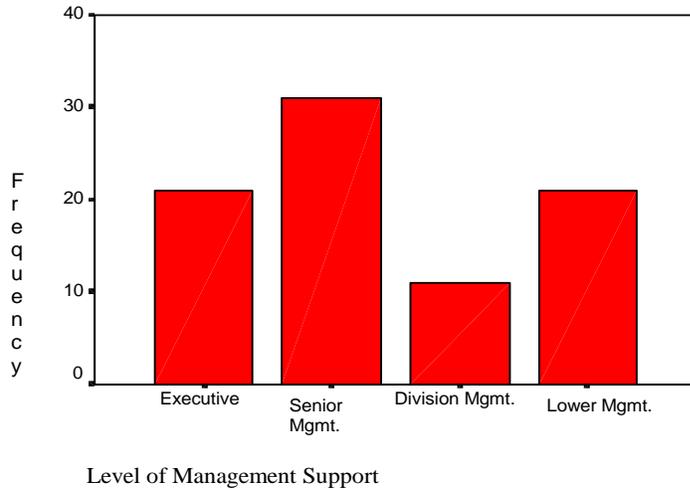
Serving as a mentor enhances the skills of a seasoned employee in the company. According to Annette Vincent, “the mentoring role is an important component of careers and life stages” (Vincent, Seymore, 1995, p. 8). In particular, mentoring helps an experienced employee gain additional skills that enhances the employees own career. “Being a mentor gives an opportunity to practice coaching and people-development skills, and gain feedback on them” (Hayes, 1998, p. 63). Successful programs require support from the top of the organization. The results of our initial survey indicate a high level of involvement from executives in the companies, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Management Level



In terms of more specific management support for the mentorship program, our survey found extensive support from the top of the organization, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Level of Management Support



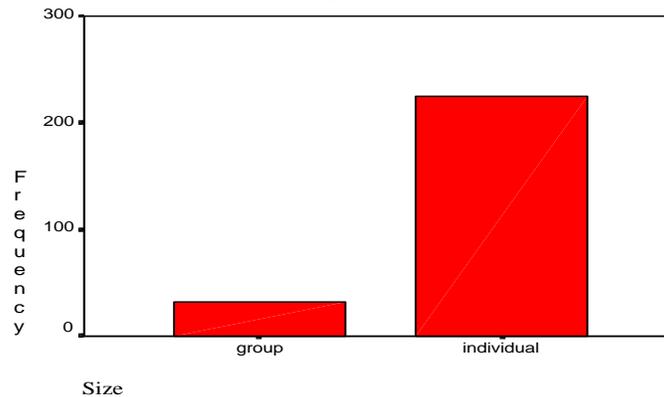
7. Mentoring Method

For many organizations, mentoring provides an alternative way of supporting employees. “Many organizations today view mentoring . . . as a powerful alternative to more traditional training strategies” (Bloch, 1993, p. 9). However, the specifics involved the structure of the program and the exact process used by the organization.

8. Program Structure

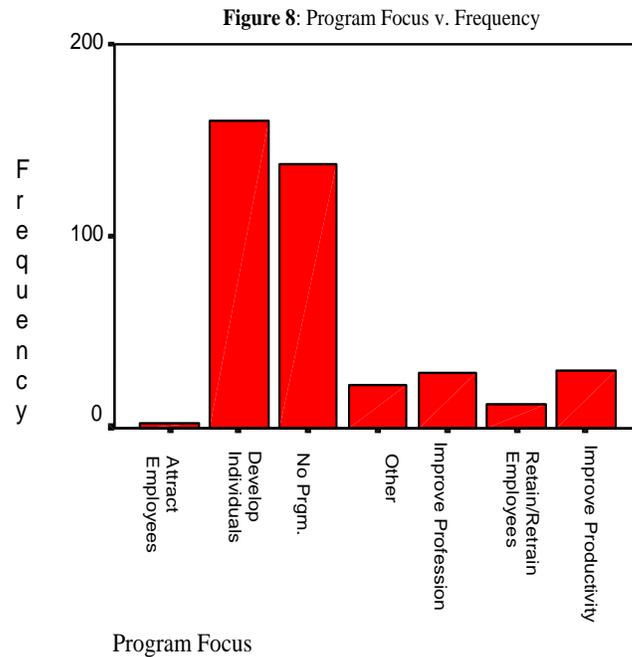
Organizations that begin mentoring programs are advised to start slowly, and then expand as they learn how to conduct the program. As Lindenberg states, “start with a small number and increase your program slowly” (Lindenberg, Lois, 1999, p. 13). But along with a small start, programs must emphasize the individual employee. As stated in *Public Management*, many programs ignore an important component for success: “an individualized, one-to-one environment for the exchange of experience of wisdom – mentoring” (Carvalho, 1996, p. 17). In our survey, employers seem to recognize this emphasis, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Group vs. Individual Focus



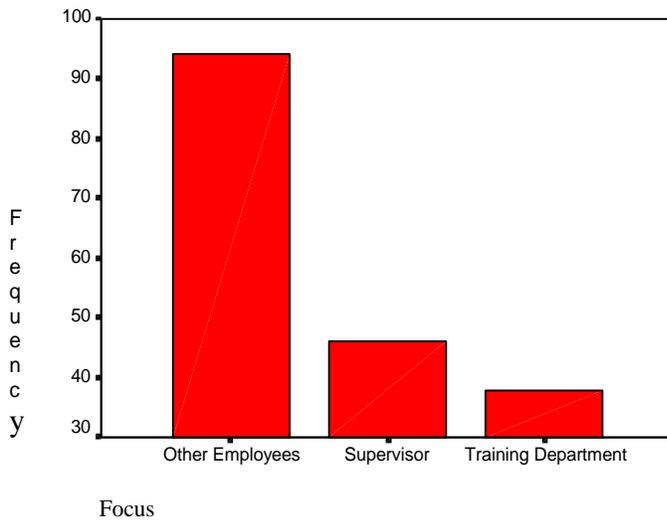
The structure of a mentorship program takes time on the part of the mentor. In particular, the mentor needs to rethink what he or she knows, then refocus on the perspective of the individual employee. As stated in the *Journal of Leadership*, mentors must spend some time developing a realistic plan for teaching their protégés. This requires empathy, in that the expert mentor must put him or herself in the place of the novice protégé and determine what information needs to be conveyed, in what sequence, over what period of time. The mentor must realize that this material is totally new to the novice, and that most people need to see or hear unfamiliar material several times before they truly learn it (Kunich, Lester, 1999, p.17).

Our survey of corporate leaders in metropolitan Denver indicates an extensive focus on the individual. Although professional and productivity concerns surfaces along with retention issues, the overwhelming response indicates a focus on the individual, as shown in Figure 8.



Once organizations recognize the need to focus on the individual employee and improve their skills, an employee will conduct the mentorship of another employee. Options include supervisors, other employees, or a training department. The results of our survey finds a higher use of other employees rather than the person’s supervisor or a separate training department for mentoring. Figure 9 reflects these findings.

Figure 9: Focus of Mentoring Program

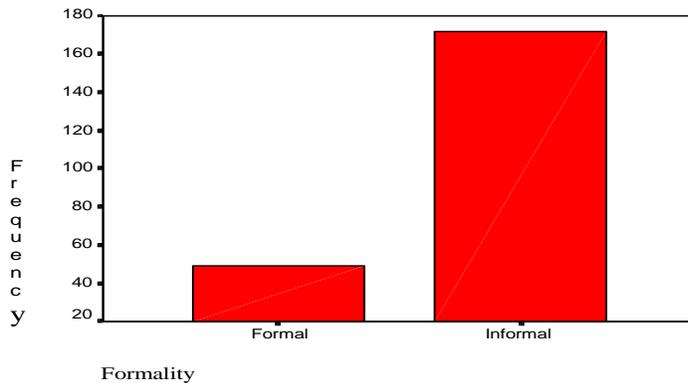


These findings support the contention made in the *Review of Business* concerning the extent of mentoring within organizations: “Employees also need to realize that individuals other than mentors, such as supervisors and peers, may be able to provide some of the functions previously labeled “mentorship functions” (Hill, Bahniuk, 1998, p. 5).

9. Mentoring Specific Process

The actual method of conducting the program relates to the need to individualize the program. In particular, the process involves a degree of informality on the part of the organization, as well as an attitude of participants that fosters the overall program. Individualized programs need to work more informally, so all participants feel relaxed and open to ideas. According to our survey, companies in the region used the informal approach, as indicated in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Level of Formality



Within this informal approach, mentoring programs still require support that spreads from the highest levels throughout the entire organization. According to Lindemberger and Zachery, organizations should “use team members to help develop the program, to champion the program, and to evaluate progress,” where team members have “an equal say and an equal vote” (Lindemberger, Zachary, 1999, p. 13).

To effectively implement a program, the mentors need to demonstrate a range of skills. Just being a “technical expert” or an “experienced” member of a company does not ensure success. Rather, mentors need to engage in the activity with a proper attitude and with a specific set of skills. According to our interview data with Denver executives, the attitude of coach far exceeded that of superior, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Attitude toward Mentoring

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Coach	148	84.9	84.9
Superior	28	15.1	100.0
Total	173	100.0	

The coaching approach rather than that of the supervisor requires “genuine two-way communication between mentor and protégé on a protracted, continuing basis” (Kunich, Lester, 1999, p. 17). Through two-way communication, the participants develop trust and confidentiality. According to Susan Bloch, “To be effective, mentoring must always be conducted in total confidentiality. As trust, mutual respect and comfort are essential to the success of any mentoring relationship” (Bloch, 1993, p. 9). Bloch’s framework implies a set of skills needed for building trust. Kristy Hayes outlines these skills, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Skills and Traits for Effective Mentoring

Being a good communicator Being interested in the other person Being a lateral thinker Having the ability to see the “big picture” Being objective and supportive Telling the truth Knowing their limitations Being able to keep opinions to themselves Supplying questions – allowing the mentee to find the answers Retaining confidentiality
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(Hayes, 1998, p. 63)

The process of mentoring thus leads to dominant roles for the mentor: “A mentor is a long-term guide, counselor and friend” (Bard, Moore, p. 256). More specifically, according to Journal of *Leadership Studies*, “A mentor is a trusted advisor, teacher, counselor, friend and/or parent, older and more senior than the person he or she helps. A mentor is there when you need them. Mentoring is an ongoing process.” (Kunich, Lester, 1999, p. 7). In developing professionals along a career path, “A mentor is always prepared to serve as a ‘travel guide’ to help the new professional navigate through new experiences” (Gualardo, 2000, p. 8).

10. Results of a Mentoring Program

The results of corporate experience in mentoring includes two types of results: evidence of actual practice in mentoring, and impact on those involved in the process, whether as mentors or as mentees. Mentoring has expanded in recent years, particularly as a means of increasing upward-mobility among employees. As reported in *Industrial Management*, “The mentoring procedure has moved to higher levels of management in the 1990’s” (Hensler, 1994, p. 20). Organizations that wish to expand their program tend to use “mentoring briefings” to introduce their “mentoring program, explain the benefits, and tell employees how they can get involved.” (Lindenberger, Lois, 1999, p. 13).

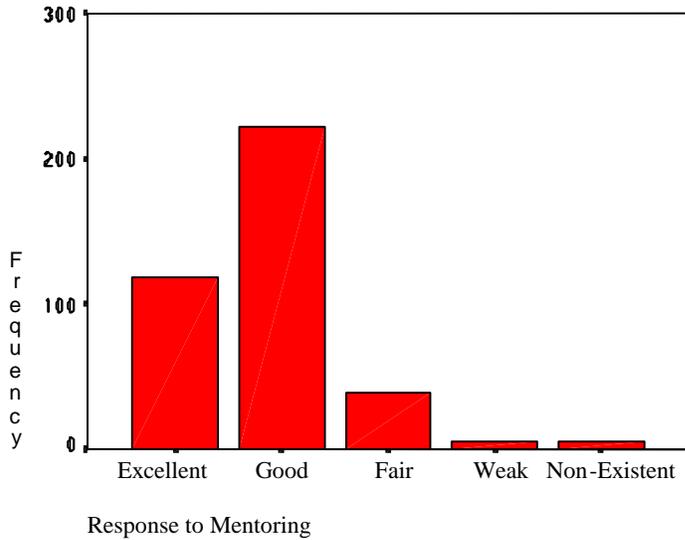
Much anecdotal evidence supports the effectiveness of mentorship. As one individual reported in *Business Week*, “I’m learning a ton—the kind of skills you’re not going to get in any business school” (Bohn, 2000, p. F66). *Fortune* magazine goes even further in its discussion:

Having mentors is “an essential part of success. I’ve never met a CEO who didn’t have several along the way.” Among the invaluable boosts mentors can give you, Farley says, is preparing you for higher levels of responsibility “by giving you a “sneak preview” of what it means to have power—removing some of the mystery and by sharing their own experiences with you, and giving you objective criticism and support, mentors really help you stretch (Fisher, 1998, p. 208).

Other studies verify the impact of mentoring programs. As Messner indicates, “By developing customized, in-house mentoring programs, more businesses are reaping the both the short- and long-term benefits of such programs. In addition to developing the skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities of new and seasoned professionals, the programs strengthen employee commitment, and the results are impressive” (Messner, 1998, p. s11). Taking a broader perspective is the *Review of Business*: “Studies indicate that mentoring leads to increased performance and promotion rate, early career advancement, greater upward mobility, higher income, greater job satisfaction, enhanced leadership ability and perceptions of greater success and influence in an organization” (Hill, Bahniuk, 1998, p. 5).

In our study of mentoring practices in metropolitan Denver, we found a high degree of satisfaction from the mentees who participated with the Denver executives. Mentoring is perhaps the most powerful method by which we can shape the future (Kunich, Lester, 1999, p. 17).

Figure 11: Reaction to mentoring



For the business community as a whole, the *Journal of Leadership* perhaps gives the best perspective on the role of mentorship in the future. Mentoring is perhaps the most powerful method by which we can shape the future (Kunich and Lester, 1999, p. 17). 📖

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Notes