STRUCTURED MENTORSHIP FOR NEW EMPLOYEES: A CASE STUDY

A. Keith Barnes, University of Redlands
Jack L. Mendleson, University of Redlands
Greg T. Horn, University of Redlands

Abstract

In The Southland Corporation's Pacific Western Division new field representatives are assigned a "Sponsor"/Mentor. Intentions include the provision of a "neutral" person with whom to talk-over problems. To examine the nature of sponsor/sponsee relationships and to evaluate participant benefits a study was conducted involving structured interviews with sponsors and sponsees. Grouped responses, in some of the focused areas of the research, provided indices (of satisfaction with the relationship, for example). In addition, sponsee perceptions of their sponsor's adherence to the six prescribed behaviors of the Robert Carkhuff (1971) model for helping relationships were measured. The level of correlation between "Carkhuffian behavior", by the sponsor, and sponsee satisfaction was established, and participant suggestions were obtained. Sponsor and Sponsee satisfaction with the program was found to be high, though sponsors are much more satisfied than sponsees. The relationship between sponsor satisfaction and treatment in the Carkhuff recommendations was found to be moderately correlated.

Introduction

In the Southland Corporation's Pacific Western Division (7-11 Stores) new field representatives are assigned a "sponsor". The sponsor is always someone with longer service in the organization who is at a higher hierarchical level in the company but is NOT the new employee's supervisor. This, according to Division Personnel Manager Dennis Johnson, provides the new person with an added source of information, guidance, encouragement and someone with whom to talk over problems in the event that such discussion is difficult with the "boss".

Now this arrangement may be quite different from "natural" mentorship, but there might well be some common characteristics. To test the nature of sponsor/sponsee relationships, and to evaluate participant acceptance and perception of benefits, a study was conducted using structured interviews with the entire population of sponsors and sponsees. At the time of the study there had been 21 sponsees in the program in the three years since its inception, and 16 managers

had served as sponsors.

Design

With the exception of a small number of open-ended questions, forced-choice items were prepared, with different sets of questions for sponsors and sponsees. Some items were grouped to provide indices for several unidimensional constructs and others were single item measures. One of the constructs measured was participant level of satisfaction; another was a general measure of satisfaction with the work/job itself; a third was whether or not the employee would recommend their job, and this employer, to a suitably qualified friend. A major construct, and one of the key dependent variables, was the degree to which sponsors adhered to the six recommended behaviors of the Robert Carkhuff (1971) model for helping relationships, as perceived by their sponsee. We sought evidence of a correlation between sponsee satisfaction and sponsor adherence to "Carkhuffian" beha-

vivors. For this we created a twelve item semantic differential with two items for each of the six dimensions of Carkhuff's recommended behaviors. Although we recognize that Carkhuff recommends a specific progression through the six "levels" of his model, we simply asked respondents to rate their sponsors on the twelve items, producing a composite which we labelled "Perceived Carkhuffian Adherence". Open ended questions provided additional information, including participant suggestions for program improvement and opportunity to check internal consistency of the instrument.

After a brief review of the literature on mentoring and on the Carkhuff model we present our findings, followed by analysis and conclusions. Finally we make observations and recommendations.

Literature Review

The review focused on mentoring in business and psychology literature and our discoveries grounded the study. Several major sub-topics in the academic study of the mentor/protege relationship were uncovered: Theory; Benefits to Individuals; Benefits to the Organization; and Formalized Programs. After a brief discussion on each of these topics we also present a brief synopsis of major items in the Helping Relationships literature.

Mentoring Theory has its roots with Mentor, the trusted friend of Ulysses who asked Mentor to guide and teach his son Telemachus. To this day, mentoring is defined as an older, wiser advisor serving as role model and guide in the growth and development of the younger person. There is affirmation of the value and importance of the mentor/protege relationship in Levinson's (1978) "Seasons of a Mans Life". Building on the work of Freud, Jung and Erikson, Levinson (et al) identified five overlapping stages of life, each with its own developmental tasks and challenges. Young adults (one of Levinson's five "eras") each need to find a mentor to help them through the challenges of their growth. It is also important for the mentor to be given a self-actualization opportunity and to "give something back" to society.

Benefits to Individuals include meeting personal development goals in an approved way

and, of course, receiving a career boost from a person in a position of authority and trust (Rochette, 1978; Farren et al, 1984). Drawbacks are seen as minimal, but may include jealousy of co-workers or the undermining of a protege's career by a frustrated competitor or mentor.

Benefits to Organizations are described by Burke (1984) in terms of job performance, early acculturation, managerial succession strengths and the general preparation of future leaders. Similarly, Farren and others cite these same benefits and add the advantage of the improved loyalty, trust and informal organizational strengths. Here again, very few negative aspects are identified but ugly rumors is one possibility; especially if the mentoring relationship crosses the sexes, or lower productivity places pressures on mentors and role conflicts occur. On the subject of females accessing mentor relationships Noe (1988) points out that there are many barriers to cross-gender mentoring relationships. Organizations which have identified the existence of such barriers may find value in structured mentorships for this one reason alone!

Formal Mentoring Programs, instituted by organizations to exploit the perceived advantages of such relationships, are not new. The guilds and strict apprenticeship programs of certain types of trade and professional employers were really, in part, in search of some of the benefits that come with mentorships. Beyond such specific training and development programs a few employers have instituted formal mentoring. These include some U.S. Government agencies and such companies as Merrill Lynch, Jewell Industries and the Southland Corporation. A commonality in all of these situations is the requirement that the mentor not be hierarchically responsible for the protege. Periodic contacts are usually a requirement, with a lot of latitude on the format of the interaction. Several researchers (Kram, 1985; Burke, 1984; Reich, 1985) have cautioned that mentoring should be encouraged in organizations but not mandated. Concerns include changing the nature (and therefore the benefits) of the relationship, superficiality, resentfulness of non-participants and, that it just "cannot be done".

The relationship between a mentor and a protege constitutes a Helping Relationship. Several models exist in the clinical and counseling psy-

chology literature which characterize dimensions of a helping relationship. One such model is that of Robert Carkhuff (1971), which offers six dimensions, or recommended behaviors, of the helper (mentor). These dimensions are: Empathy, Respect, Concreteness, Genuineness, Initiation, Confrontation, and Immediacy. Similarly, Egan (1970) proposes six dimensions: Listening, Empathy, Focusing, Challenging, Developing Preferred Scenarios, and Action. There is obvious similarity between these two models and we chose to design our instruments around the Carkhuff constructs.

Findings

Mentor Satisfaction with the program was relatively uniform and at a high level. The range of possible scores for this measure was 12 to 60 and the range of actual scores obtained was from 45 to 55, with a mean of 49 (n=16).

Protege Satisfaction with the program was not uniform, or as high as for mentors. With the same range of possible scores (12-60) actual observations ranged from 25 to 57, with a mean of 37 (n=21).

Mentor and Protege Satisfaction with their employment in general was found to be quite high and uniform. The range of possible scores was 3 to 15 and for mentors the mean score was 13.9. For the protege the mean score was 12. Construct validity for this might be challenged, though the internal consistency was found to be moderately good ($r=.69$).

Protege Satisfaction & "Carkhuffian" Behavior were found to be positively correlated, but not to the degree we anticipated. The Pearson 'r' value of .62 ($r^2=.41$) indicates that either the constructs themselves lack stability and validity, or, as we choose to believe, there are other factors of influence not revealed in our research. The internal consistency on "Carkhuffian" behaviors was found to be moderate at $r=.61$. In retrospect we feel that proteges may not have been willing to be brutally honest about the behaviors of their mentors, or they may not have been able to relate some of the questionnaire items to behaviors observed.

Other Subjective Responses were analyzed and one key finding was that all participants

identified spatial separation as a key deterrent to full development of the mentoring relationship. Several mentors utilized telephone contacts exclusively, leading us to conclude that the relationship could not have been developed fully. Proteges felt, in some cases, that the hierarchical distance from their mentor was a problem and that such distance makes the mentor rather unapproachable. The combination of hierarchical and spatial separation means that there is little chance for maximization of mentorship benefits. Many participants offered the following additional suggestions: Emphasis should be placed on earlier face-to-face contacts; Longer periods of involvement should be encouraged or mandated (Southland officially concludes the formal sponsorship after six months); More structure should be employed, to ensure frequent contacts and concrete outcomes.

Virtually all participants acknowledged the potentials of the program as a real service to proteges. Mentors and the organization itself also benefit. Frequently mentioned gains were: An opportunity to keep in touch with what goes on "in the trenches"; Management talents being more widely recognized; and the spreading of a broader perspective among employees at a lower level.

The most frequently mentioned topics in discussions between proteges and mentors were: The work load; Working hours; "Rules of the game"; and other political/survival factors.

Discussion

While the foregoing information was gathered in specific research at one company, it may generalize more widely. Our findings in this study are quite consistent with most other research into mentoring. The following observations represent a logical extension of our findings into prescriptions and recommendations.

Ideal Mentor Behaviors.

Formal mentoring relationships, which are designed to assist in early employment acculturation, benefit from early contact between the two parties (perhaps within the first few days of employment). Face-to-face meetings are clearly the best, so that the mentor is able to communicate the following messages and values: Caring

and access/availability; Specific ground rules and access channels, including after hours and weekends, if the mentor is willing to be accessible at such times. The mentor must show an open, caring attitude and take the time to get to know the protege as an individual and as a whole person. If contacts are not initiated by the protege then the mentor should set aside specific calendar time and make the contact without feeling rushed. Sometimes any festering problems will not surface simply because a general question is asked, such as "How is everything going?" If the mentor is experienced there will be "expected" difficulties, or at least ones which have previously surfaced, and voluntary discussion of how others have faced such problems may open up the protege sufficiently to ensure that help is sought. The self-disclosure approach is often fruitful, in which the mentor acknowledges his/her own weaknesses and failings, in an effort to build trust.

Fostering Effective Mentor Behavior.

Selection criteria for mentors must be clearly established and articulated. Some key factors include: a genuine desire to serve in this way; availability; reasonable proximity and access; an open, trusting personality. Mentors should not be so highly ranked as to create perceptions of separation from the level of the protege. Orientation and training of mentors is undoubtedly helpful especially useful would be some information on the work and challenges of the proteges. While most of the Southland sponsors had been promoted from field positions and had direct experience with the work of their proteges, it is especially important that such knowledge be based on current realities. Sponsors must understand operating policies which affect the protege along with the current external sources of protege frustration. Potential mentors should have opportunity to spend some time, one-on-one, with successful mentors. An assumption that a highly successful manager will automatically make a great mentor is not valid!

Program Ideals.

Clear program objectives must be established and published, even among those not participating. Policies and procedures must be clearly articulated. Some valuable policies include: confidentiality; supportiveness & commitment;

informality and friendliness; the voluntary nature of the program and assurance of protege freedom to arrange an alternative mentor without fear of rancor or resentment.

Overall monitoring and periodic evaluation of the program is recommended. It may be advisable to appoint a sponsorship officer if the program involves more than a handful of people. This does not necessarily have to be someone within a personnel or training unit but could, instead, be a line manager with an exceptional feel for the program and good relationships and contacts/credibility throughout the organization. The sponsorship officer should give praise and recognition to effective mentors, as well as constructive suggestions for those less effective. A continuing effort to appraise individual mentors, without snooping, is the only really effective evaluation, though open self-appraisal has a place, as does a program of peer appraisal.

We have found the organizational and interpersonal dimensions of structured mentoring to be quite as complex as other organizational dynamics. It is apparent, however that there can be benefits for all concerned in mentorships, even those not naturally occurring. In organizations which are structured in such a way that naturally occurring mentorships are difficult, such as Southland's decentralized marketing organization, formalization can be fruitful. Obviously, however, the highest potentials can be frustrated through poor follow-up or inattention to potential difficulties in a proactive manner. Additionally, mentoring can only be forced upon adults to a limited degree. Recalcitrant proteges will not be served well, nor will the organization, if meetings with a poor mentor are forced, uncomfortable or not productive. Mentors must be more than just successful volunteers with some free time, or those who receive organizational incentives to serve. Just as is the case with mentors in naturally formed relationships there are prerequisite qualities and values within effective mentors. These natural capabilities, attitudes and values are not obscure and they can be recognized, encouraged, and utilized with appropriate management commitment.

Continued on page 67