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Mentoring and the tolerance of complexity

Bob Garvey ^{a,*}, Geof Alred ^b

^a *Sheffield Hallam Business School, Stoddart Building, City Campus, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WB, UK*

^b *The University of Durham, School of Education, Centre for Studies in Counselling, Leazes Road, Durham DH1 1TA, UK*

Abstract

This paper explores mentoring in the light of complexity theory and the premium placed upon knowledge in organisational viability. A key question is “what is the role of mentoring, as a developmental and knowledge creating process, in a complex environment?” There are two parts to the discussion. First, we explore complexity at work, and what it means for the individual. We link the central ideas of complexity theory with the notion of a ‘corporate curriculum’, an inclusive concept intended to capture the complex nature of learning at work, in all its variants. Secondly, we speculate on the contribution mentoring can make in complex organisations where employees are part of a knowledge economy by virtue of being knowledge producers and being engaged in learning at work. The environments in which we work are becoming more complex and mentoring is also complex. There is a synergy here. For people living in complexity where there are few rules, no right answers and no predictable outcomes, we suggest that mentoring can play a distinctive role in helping people to ‘tolerate’ complexity and remain effective. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. The backdrop

Kessels [1] argues that “organisations have a direct stake in the personal enrichment of employees because excellence on the job requires employees who are comfortable with their work and who have strong and stable personalities. Personal enrichment is thus less an employee privilege than a condition for good performance.” His may be a challenging statement for people working within a capitalist

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: r.garvey@shu.ac.uk (B. Garvey), geof.alred@durham.ac.uk (G. Alred).

society as it suggests that economic progress, is strongly associated with social conditions, learning and a sense of morality.

Mentoring is becoming increasingly employed in a range of occupational settings [2]. We speculate that this is because mentoring activity encourages and facilitates informal or ‘open’ learning (see page 11). More traditional formal or ‘closed’ approaches to learning are increasingly being criticised for not delivering enhanced capability and performance to organisations [3]. Against this background it becomes inevitable that alternatives to the ‘formal’ are investigated by organisations.

In the context of workplace learning concepts such as “situated learning” [4] and the “zone of proximal development” [5] take on particular significance for there can be little doubt that the message in these theories is very clear — learning is a social activity.

Workplace mentoring (as we conceive it, see page 5) because it is social, situated in the “zone of proximal development” [6] and involves both the cognitive and the meta-cognitive is all-engaging and is therefore learning of a higher mental order. Gladstone [7] cites Bolles [8] as stating that “a mentor is the highest level educator” (8: 10). And, Vygotsky [6] would agree

Any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external stage in its development because it is initially a social function...Any higher mental function was external because it was social at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental function. (p. 162)

Mentoring is related to and associated with reconceptualisations of organisations, such as the “knowledge-creating company” [9].

2. Changing organisations

Organisations tend to be motivated by ideas which may help them achieve competitive advantage, survival or progress in their activities. But, the world is changing. For instance, the business world in the late eighties and early nineties saw ‘the quality boom’. This was primarily driven by organisations seeking competitive advantage through the superior quality of their products or services. This, combined with a drive to cut costs, resulted in great developments in technology and changes in working practices. Manufacturing industries saw the introduction of sophisticated automation and consequently the increased demand for a technically skilled workforce able to be flexible and adaptable. Ironically, some skilled workers started to become de-skilled as a result of introducing new technology [11].

The public sector in the UK has also seen many changes. In the main, these were driven by a political desire to reduce public expenditure but at the same time there was an attempt to improve the quality of service. Many public sector organisations became subject to ‘market principles’ with compulsory competitive tendering and ‘commercialisation’ of its activities.

High quality products and service at reduced cost became the entry point at which

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