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# Aiming for career success: The role of learning goal orientation in mentoring relationships

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## Abstract

Learning goal orientation of mentors and protégés was investigated as it relates to protégés' mentoring functions received and outcomes (i.e., managerial career aspirations and career satisfaction). Data from 217 mentor–protégé dyads comprised of working professionals from a variety of industries were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance. Results indicated that protégés who possessed high levels of learning goal orientation similar to their mentor were associated with the highest levels of psychosocial support. These protégés also reported higher levels of career development, idealized influence, enacted managerial aspirations, desired managerial aspirations, and career satisfaction when compared to mentor–protégé dyads who possessed low levels of learning goal orientation or dyads with dissimilar levels of learning goal orientation. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Learning goal orientation; Mentoring; Career success

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## 1. Introduction

The person who makes a success of living is the one who sees his (or her) goal steadily and aims for it unswervingly. That is dedication.

Cecil B. De Mille

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The setting and pursuit of goals for personal and professional development is an important element in the transfer of new learning in mentor–protégé relationships (Kram, 1985). In fact, *mentoring* may be defined as “a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon *goal* of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies” (Murray, 1991, p. xiv). Mentors impart wisdom about the norms, values, and mores that are specific to the organization (Gibson & Cordova, 1999), provide advocacy, counseling, support, and protection to protégés (Kram, 1985), and offer feedback and information to help the protégé attain his or her goals (Douglas, 1997). Mentoring relationships provide protégés with benefits such as higher levels of overall compensation, promotions and career advancement, enhanced career mobility, and career satisfaction (cf., Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997). Yet, mentor–protégé relationships may not be beneficial because protégés may not *learn* important career enhancing tactics for pursuing goals from their mentors (Mumford, 1995; Scandura, 1998) or may receive limited developmental opportunities (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

One potential reason for an unsuccessful mentoring relationship may be different learning goal orientations that the mentor and protégé bring to the relationship. “When a task is approached from a *learning goal* orientation, individuals strive to understand something new or to increase their level of competence in a given activity” (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996, p. 26). Learning goal orientation is a relatively stable dispositional trait that individuals bring with them into relationships with others (Button et al., 1996; Dweck, 1986). Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Bempechat, London, & Dweck, 1991; Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) pointed out that learning goals pursued by individuals motivate behavior and influence the interpretation and reaction to outcomes.

Learning-goal-oriented individuals are motivated by competence development and choose challenging tasks that foster learning, even if their assessment of current skills is low (Dweck, 1986). Learning goal orientation has been linked to increased use of obstacles as learning cues that allow the individual to analyze and vary strategies. Such learning cues result in higher levels of expectations for success in the face of obstacles. Mentoring also focuses on competence development by offering challenging job assignments that help attain the protégé’s career goals (Kram, 1985) and providing strategies for achieving goals of recognition and success within the organization (Eby, 1997). Learning-goal-oriented mentors and protégés are likely to focus on effort and intrinsic motivation, as a means of utilizing ability, and raising expectations of accomplishments. In fact, such intellectually stimulating and intrinsically motivating behavior displayed by mentors has been linked to mentoring functions received by protégés (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Thus, while mentoring has been associated with protégé socialization into organizations (Kram, 1985), mentoring may also be described as a learning and competence development goal-driven process. The study of mentor–protégé relationships may be enhanced through an understanding of the learning goal orientation associated with each party in the relationship.

Prior research based on the similarity-attraction paradigm (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Thibodeaux & Lowe, 1996) suggests that similarity between

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