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The protégé's role in negative mentoring experiences[☆]

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Abstract

Negative experiences were obtained from mentors to identify the role played by protégés in creating difficulties within mentoring relationships. Content analysis revealed a wide range of examples, many of which were consistent with theory and research on dysfunctional mentoring and interpersonal relationships. The findings also indicated that the how typical the negative experience was related positively to its perceived impact on the relationship. Further, as the perceived impact of the experience increased, relationship satisfaction decreased. The results are discussed in terms of future research, mentoring theory, and applied practice.

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1. Introduction

Research on organizational mentoring typically focuses on the benefits for protégés and, to a lesser extent, for mentors and organizations. For instance, a recent meta-analysis indicates that mentoring is related to positive job attitudes for

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protégés, as well subjective and objective indicators of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, in press). Mentors report benefits as well, including better support networks, satisfaction from helping others grow and succeed, and access to information that facilitates job performance (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Organizations may also benefit since mentoring is related to lower protégé intentions to turnover (Allen et al., in press).

While studying benefits of mentoring has demonstrated the importance of these relationships, little research has addressed the long-held contention that mentorships are susceptible to problems (Kram, 1985; Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein, & McKee, 1978). Two recent theoretical papers discuss dysfunctional mentoring and suggest ideas for future research (Feldman, 1999; Scandura, 1998) and two empirical studies examine protégés' reports of negative experiences with mentors (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Eby & Allen, 2002). While these represent important extensions of the mentoring literature, many questions remain. Further, existing research examines relational problems from the perspective of the protégé. Feldman (1999) notes: "As a counterweight to the 'protégé as victim' model, more empirical research is needed on toxic protégés. . . Which behaviors do protégés engage in to bring upon the wrath or displeasure of their mentors? . . . perhaps the greatest need in future empirical research is data from the mentors themselves. . ." (p. 274). Further, discussions of relational problems tend to make the distinction between functional versus dysfunctional mentoring, rather than recognizing that mentoring is likely to be marked by both positive and negative experiences over time. However, recent work by Ragins, Cotton, and Miller's (2000) on "marginal mentoring" (p.1190) suggests that it is important to conceptualize mentoring difficulty as existing on a continuum where some relationships are marginally effective, some are ineffective, and others are truly dysfunctional.

The present study adopts such an approach and pursues two objectives. First, a continuum of relational problems from the mentor's perspective is proposed and examples of negative experiences with protégés are mapped on to this continuum. Second, the current study explores how both the reported typicality of the overall negative experience with a protégé, as well as its perceived impact on the relationship as whole, is related to relationship quality.

2. The mentor's perspective on relational problems

Although Kram (1985) emphasizes the role of both mentors and protégés in creating a high or low quality relationship, protégé contributions have received little attention in general, and practically none with respect to problems in mentoring relationships [but see Feldman (1999), for a theoretical treatment of this issue]. Despite this, several lines of research support the notion that protégés may be perceived by mentors as creating or contributing to relational problems, despite their lesser power in the relationship (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989).

Research on interpersonal relationships discusses a variety of behaviors that either member may engage in that can lead to relational problems, such as fights

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