



Why does mentoring work? The role of perceived organizational support

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ABSTRACT

The authors examined the mediating role of perceived organizational support in the relationship between mentoring support received and work attitudes. Perceived organizational support partly mediated the relationship between specific types of mentoring support and job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. Specifically, sponsorship, exposure and visibility, and role modeling appear to be related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment through perceived organizational support. Perceived organizational support did not appear to mediate the relationship between other specific forms of mentoring support and job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

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1. Introduction

Organizational researchers have found that employees with mentors report higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, compensation and promotions (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004), showing the potential importance of having a mentor for achieving both subjective and objective career benefits. Despite this robust stream of research demonstrating the importance of mentoring relationships, the mechanism underlying the association between mentoring and protégé outcomes is largely unknown (e.g., Ragins & Verbos, 2007; Ramaswami & Dreher, 2007). The lack of attention given to examining why mentoring works represents a significant gap in the literature since in the absence of this information it is difficult, if not impossible, to build comprehensive causal models of the mentoring process (Bearman, Blake-Beard, Hunt, & Crosby, 2007).

The present study directly addresses the question of “why does mentoring work?” by drawing upon social exchange theory to propose that a key mechanism linking the receipt of mentoring support and work outcomes is perceived organizational support (POS) (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). The over-arching premise of the current study is that a mentor may be a lens through which the protégé develops beliefs about his or her organization, as has been suggested in the literature (Orpen, 1997) but not empirically examined. We focus on supervisory mentoring since it is distinct from leadership (Scandura & Williams, 2004), adds incremental variance to the prediction of work attitudes over and above leadership (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Scandura & Williams, 2004), and often correlates more strongly with work attitudes than does non-supervisory mentoring (e.g., Payne & Huffman, 2005).

The present study extends mentoring scholarship in three important ways. First, we directly address the criticism that little is known about why mentoring works by examining POS as a potential mediator. Second, we provide a fine-grained investigation of why mentoring works by examining the relationship between *specific types* of career-related (e.g., sponsorship, exposure and visibility) and psychosocial (e.g., friendship, coaching) mentoring support and POS. Third, we bridge the

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mentoring, social exchange and POS literature to develop and test a parsimonious, theory-based model of the mentoring process. In doing so, we set the groundwork for future research and theory development on mentoring relationships at work.

1.1. A social exchange perspective on mentoring

Social exchange theory rests on the assertion that individuals develop, maintain and exit relationships based on their perceived costs and benefits. As an individual benefits from a relationship this generates a norm of reciprocity where the person who is on the receiving end of an exchange feels compelled to reciprocate to balance out the social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In mentoring relationships, the benefits exchanged fit into the social exchange resource categories of emotional support, information, services, and status (Kram, 1985).

Protégés can receive two general types of benefits from the mentoring relationship, which we propose set in motion the social exchange process. The first protégé benefit is career-related support, which serves to advance the protégé's career through the specific mentor support behaviors of sponsorship, coaching, protection, challenging assignments, and exposure and visibility. The second protégé benefit is psychosocial support, which provides protégés with a sense of social support, often serving to increase the protégé's sense of competence, effectiveness, and belongingness. Friendship, role modeling, counseling, acceptance and confirmation are subsumed under psychosocial support (Kram, 1985).

Although the specific forms of mentoring support are grouped according to career and psychosocial support, the specific forms of support relate differentially to theoretically related constructs. Meta-analytic research finds corrected correlations between protégé perceptions of relationship satisfaction and mentoring received that range from .37 for career-related support to .62 for psychosocial support (Allen et al., 2004). There are also sizable differences in the magnitude of zero-order correlations between the *specific types of mentoring support* (e.g., exposure and visibility, protection, role modeling) and relationship satisfaction, with correlations ranging from a low of .14 for protection to a high of .70 for friendship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). These findings indicate that the specific types of mentoring support are related, *yet distinct*, suggesting that it is important to use more fine-grained measures of mentoring support.

1.2. Mentoring support as a predictor of POS

POS is defined as a social exchange relationship that results from exchanges between an employee and his or her employing organization. Specifically, when employees believe that the organization is committed to them, they feel obligated to be committed to the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Actions on the part of organizational agents lead employees to personify the organization and develop perceptions about how the organization values them. Empirical research supports this assumption by finding that POS mediates the relationship between leader-member exchange (LMX; Graen & Scandura, 1987) and work attitudes and behaviors (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). While mentoring has not been examined in relation to POS, it seems reasonable to argue that supervisory mentors may also be viewed as agents of the organization. In fact, Orpen (1997) speculated that seeing the mentor as a representative of the organization is the reason mentoring leads to increased organizational commitment, although this idea has not been examined empirically.

According to Eisenberger et al. (1986), in order for POS to develop, the employee must perceive an organizational agent's actions as discretionary. Mentoring may be a specific type of discretionary prosocial behavior (Allen, 2004). Moreover, the specific types of career-related and psychosocial support that are provided to a protégé are unique currencies of exchange in a mentoring relationship rather than resources that are universally provided to *all* subordinates (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001). We propose that through supportive interactions with mentors, protégés may develop perceptions about whether or not the organization cares for their well-being. This can happen through the receipt of career-related and psychosocial mentoring.

Career-related mentoring functions help prepare protégés for career development in the organization, increase the protégé's sense of professional competence, and demonstrates the mentor's commitment to helping the protégé (Kram, 1985). Both sponsorship and exposure and visibility involve the mentor providing public support for the protégé. This can come in the form of actively nominating the protégé for desirable lateral moves and stretch assignments (sponsorship) or by introducing the protégé to other influential senior individuals in the organization (exposure and visibility). Coaching support can also enhance career development by teaching the protégé how to effectively navigate in the organization by providing information on how to accomplish work tasks, receive recognition, and meet one's career aspirations. Challenging assignments can also support career development by providing opportunities for new learning, especially when coupled with feedback and technical support. Finally, protection involves the mentor taking credit or blame in controversial situations, intervening on behalf of the protégé in potentially career-damaging situations, and shielding the protégé from high visibility assignments where the risk of failure is high or the protégé is ill-equipped for the task. Career-related support from the mentor may foster positive attitudes towards the mentor, which in turn contributes to the belief that the organization cares about the protégé's well-being. Likewise, by preparing the protégé for long-term positive organizational experiences, career-related mentoring support is likely to signal to the protégé that the organization is invested in his or her career development, which again should facilitate the development of POS.

Psychosocial support may also predict protégé POS since these mentor behaviors enhance a protégé's sense of professional identity and competence. Acceptance and confirmation offered by the mentor helps the protégé derive a sense of po-

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