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Protégés' and mentors' reactions to participating in formal mentoring programs: A qualitative investigation[☆]

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Abstract

Mentors and protégés from two formal mentoring programs were interviewed about the benefits associated with program participation, problems encountered in the program, and recommendations for program improvements. The most commonly reported benefits for protégés included learning, coaching, career planning, and psychosocial support. Mentors most frequently reported learning, developing a personal relationship, personal gratification, and enhanced managerial skills. Both groups identified a range of problems including mentor–protégé mismatches, scheduling difficulties, and geographic distance. Unique problems were also identified, including mentor neglect (by protégés), unmet expectations (by protégés), structural separation from the mentor (by protégés), and feelings of personal inadequacy (by mentors). Finally, suggestions for program improvement were identified such as clearer communication of program objectives, better matching, targeted participation in the program, and better program monitoring. Findings are discussed in terms of what we currently know about informal mentoring and implications for mentoring theory. Suggestions for mentoring practice are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring is an intense interpersonal relationship where a more senior individual (the mentor) provides guidance and support to a more junior organizational member (the protégé) (Kram, 1985). In addition to providing career guidance and personal support, mentoring can facilitate socialization into the organization (McManus & Russell, 1997; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993) and be a mechanism for on-the-job training for protégés (Eddy, Tannenbaum, Alliger, D'Abate, & Givens, 2001). Mentoring is also related to important protégé outcomes, including both subjective (e.g., job satisfaction, career satisfaction) and objective (e.g., salary, promotion rate) indicators of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lima, & Lentz, 2004). In an effort to capitalize on the benefits of mentoring, many major U.S. corporations such as Wachovia Corporation, MTV Networks, Lockheed-Martin, American Airlines, Bank of America, Charles Schwab, Marriott International, Sarah Lee, and Proctor and Gamble have formal mentoring programs in an effort to attract, develop, and retain high quality employees (Eddy et al., 2001).

While formal mentoring programs are used extensively as a career development tool, most of the empirical research is either based on *informal or spontaneously developed* mentoring relationships or has failed to ask protégés whether or not they are involved in formal or informal relationships (Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). This represents a gap in the literature since formal and informal mentorships differ in terms of how the relationship is initiated (e.g., spontaneous attraction versus third-party matching), the structure of the relationship (e.g., relationship length, contracting goals), and other relational characteristics (e.g., formality of interactions) (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). These factors may influence the benefits obtained through participation in formal mentoring programs for mentors and protégés, and contribute to relationship problems such as poor interpersonal fit or lack of perceived commitment to the relationship. Thus, rather than assume that formal relationships mirror informal ones, we concur with Wanberg and colleagues (2003) and propose that it is essential to examine formal mentoring relationships in their own right. This will allow the empirically based development of theory and empirical research on formal mentoring.

Given the limited research on formal mentoring programs and the repeated call for empirical research on the topic (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003), the present study provides an examination of the benefits and problems associated with participation in formal mentoring programs. Because so little is known about formal mentoring programs we take a qualitative, exploratory approach. Qualitative research is particularly useful in the early stages of research, such as the case here, where the identification of relevant variables and contextual conditions related to the phenomenon are important (Babbie, 2001).

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