Factors that contribute to the satisfaction of mentors and protégés taking part in a formal mentoring program.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from a case study that investigated the factors that were important to the satisfaction of mentors and protégés taking part in a formal mentoring program conducted within a large public accounting firm in the United States. The mentors and protégés in this case study identified some of the factors that impacted upon their satisfaction with their formal mentoring relationships. Satisfactory relationships were more likely to develop if the mentor and protégé interacted frequently in face-to-face meetings. It helped if they had shared interests and values. It also helped if they were both committed to being part of the program. The implications of these findings for HR practitioners are also discussed. This includes the need to have senior management support for the program, the need to establish clear objectives for the program and the importance of having an effective matching process.
This paper reports some of the findings from a case study of a formal mentoring program undertaken by the researcher in a larger public accounting firm in the United States. The researcher was a senior human resource management practitioner with the firm and was responsible for the implementation and evaluation of the formal mentoring program. The research was undertaken as part of a Masters Degree in Business Leadership at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (Australia) in 2000.

The paper begins by outlining why businesses are showing increasing interest in formal mentoring programs. The existing literature on the factors that contribute to the development of satisfactory mentoring relationships within such programs is then summarised. This is followed by a description of the study and the major findings. The paper concludes with some recommendations for practitioners interested in implementing such schemes.
Introduction

Historically, mentoring relationships in business organizations have developed naturally between two individuals, usually as a result of shared interests and common beliefs (Noe 1988). These relationships have traditionally not been recognized nor sanctioned by the organization. Given the rapid rate of growth and change within organizations over the last couple of decades, the need for person to person mentoring has become increasingly evident. The movement of women and minorities into upper levels of management in recent years and the shortage of skilled managers have also created a renewed interest in mentoring as a management development tool (Jossi 1997).

Organizations are now starting to develop and implement formal mentoring programs rather than leave the development of these relationships to chance. Often, one key objective is to make this type of development opportunity available to a larger and more diverse group of employees. It is estimated that one third of major US companies have implemented a formal mentoring program (Bragg 1989 cited in Allen and Poteet 1999, p.59). Also a recent study by Douglas and McCauley (1997) found that those organizations that did not have a program in place were planning on developing one within the next three years.

This represents a significant investment of time and money by these organizations and senior managers and human resource professionals will expect to see a return on their investment into such programs. Not all formal mentoring programs are successful, in fact, many have failed (Clutterbuck 1992; Douglas and McCauley 1999). It is therefore important that programs are designed and implemented in ways that best facilitate the development of effective mentoring relationships. This study aimed to identify what the program participants thought some of the
critical success factors might be, by examining the experience of mentors and protégés in one firm.

For the purposes of this paper, a mentoring relationship is determined to be satisfactory if:

1. both the mentor and protégé reported that they were satisfied with the relationship, and
2. the protégé was able to identify career related and/or psychosocial benefits they had gained from the relationship (see below).

**Previous research on what makes formal mentoring relationships successful**

Despite the increased interest in formalized mentoring programs, little research-based literature has emerged which focuses on the factors that impact upon the development of satisfactory mentor/protégé relationships. Noe (1988) completed one of the first studies that attempted to investigate the determinants of satisfactory formal mentoring relationships. Using a framework developed by Kram (1983), he investigated whether protégés in formally assigned mentoring relationships could receive career related and psychosocial functions similar to those reported in informal mentoring relationships (career related functions are those that help the protégé advance within an organization and psychosocial functions focus on enhancing the overall competency and effectiveness of the protégé). He found that protégés in formal mentoring programs reported receiving psychosocial benefits but limited career related benefits (Noe 1988).

He also investigated the gender composition of mentoring pairs, the amount of time they spent together, and the quality of the interaction between them as other possible factors impacting the
success of formal mentoring relationships. He found that mixed gender pairings were more effective as were pairs who met regularly.

More recent studies have continued Noe’s (1988) earlier work. Montgomery (1993) found that it was important for the mentor and protégé to have some prior, positive familiarity with one another, similarity in terms of having a strong desire to succeed and motivation to work, flexibility in individual styles and shared values around work. Stromei (1998) found that sharing the same values, and having the opportunity for the protégé to socially interact with their mentor were two factors influencing protégé satisfaction and ultimately the success of the formal mentoring relationship. Other critical factors that emerged from her study included the quality of projects and assignments that the mentors and protégés worked on together, the mentor’s availability and the number of meetings between the mentor and protégé. Viator (1999) investigated the impact of setting goals and objectives on formal mentoring relationships and found those pairs that developed goals and agendas were more satisfied.

**Research objective and matters for investigation**

The objective of this study was to identify the factors that mentors and protégés thought influenced the development of satisfactory formal mentoring relationships. As described above, some of the barriers to effective formal mentoring relationships were highlighted by Noe (1988). He found that time limitations, incompatible work schedules and physical distance were the most frequently cited reasons for the lack of interaction between the mentor and protégé so particular attention was paid to these factors. Attention was also paid to whether the pairs developed goals and agendas as this was a factor that Viator (1999) reported as being important. The study also attempted to identify other matters that the mentors and protégés thought contributed significantly to the success of the program, but which have not been reported in the literature.
Methods

The setting for the case study research was a large public accounting firm in the US. The firm had approximately 28,000 employees spread over 100 locations throughout the US and was part of a much larger international firm. The firm had found through the results of an annual HR survey that employees thought that informal mentoring in the organization was not as effective as it might be, largely due to the firm’s enormous growth and the number of new employees. Because of this, the decision was taken by the organisation’s senior leaders to establish a pilot formal mentoring program. The researcher was the co-ordinator of this pilot program.

The program participants included twenty two Senior Managers as protégés and twenty two Partners as mentors. The Senior Managers in the program were randomly selected from a wider pool of 74 Senior Managers attending a national development center during 1999. The purpose of the development center was to prepare the Senior Managers for partnership within the firm. Although the protégés were randomly selected, one of the objectives was to ensure a gender balance among the participants and as a result, an even number of men and women (protégés) were selected to participate in the program. The mentors (Partners) in the program were selected by senior leadership at the firm on the basis of their strong leadership and interpersonal skills. Both the mentors and the protégés were located in a variety of offices throughout the midwest region of the US and were drawn from a number of functional areas. The program was formally launched in September 1999 and ran for approximately twelve months.
Research Design

The research design used was an exploratory case study approach. A case study can be defined as ‘…an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin 1994, p.13). The case study method was favored in this study over other methods such as experiments, surveys and histories. Robert Stake (1981, p. 32) has argued that good case studies can ‘…provide more valid portrayals, better bases for personal understanding of what is going on, and solid grounds for considering action’. Some of the advantages of using this method compared to other methods were that it ‘…attempts to be comprehensive and involves you in describing and analysing the full richness and variety of events and issues in the organisation or department in question’ (Jankowicz 1991, p.164).

There are prejudices against case study research (Yin 1994; Tellis 1997; Orum et al 1991; Stake 1998). The primary concern often cited is the lack of rigour. Yin (1994, p.9) suggests that often researchers, when using this method, ‘…allow biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions’. Although the researcher was also the Program Coordinator for the mentoring program, she sought to overcome bias by asking the interviewees (mentors and protégés) to review the interview notes to ensure they adequately reflected the content of the discussion. The researcher also used another independent researcher to review the raw data and the findings to ensure that there was sufficient reason for drawing the conclusions from the data.

Data was collected from the program participants by conducting standardized open-ended telephone interviews nine months after the launch (Patton 1990). Each of the program participants were taken through the same interview questions. The researcher decided to collect data through interviews instead of questionnaires as she thought that this would produce a higher
response rate and also enable her to gain better contextual information. The interview questions asked the protégés and mentors to report on what they thought had been the critical success factors in their formal mentoring relationship. The interview questions for this study were designed to confirm findings presented in the literature review. In addition the researcher used open ended questions to discover other factors critical to the development of satisfactory formal mentoring relationships.

Yin (1994) suggests that it is important to have a general analytic strategy when conducting case study analysis. The preferred strategy is to rely on the theoretical propositions that led to the case study (Yin 1994). This helps the researcher focus on the type of data that is relevant to the research study. Once the data had been collected from the interviews in this study, the next step for the researcher was to code and categorise the primary patterns in the data (Patton 1990). This involved analysing the content of the interviews with the program participants.

Pattern matching was used to analyse the data. This involved making some predictions based on current knowledge, informed by the literature review. The researcher developed some predictions around the research question based on her experience with the pilot program and the literature reviewed.

She predicted:

1. That the greater the number of interactions between the mentor and the protégé, the more satisfied the protégé would be with the relationship. It was also thought that face-to-face meetings would contribute more to the development of a successful relationship than would phone or email communication. Further, it was predicted that pairs who were separated geographically would be more likely to experience greater challenges
and would report being less satisfied than those who were able to meet on a regular basis.

2. That if the mentor and the protégé had a strategy and agenda for each of their interactions, the more likely it was that the parties would gain benefit from the interaction.

3. That protégés and mentors who held shared values, beliefs and work ethics would develop more satisfactory relationships than those who did not.

3. That more satisfactory relationships would develop if both parties were committed to the program.

Findings

This section outlines the results of the study. First the findings in relation to the predictions made above will be discussed. Additional findings which were not predicted are also described.

1. That the greater the number of interactions between the mentor and the protégé, the more satisfied the protégé would be with the relationship. The results showed that the frequency of interaction between the mentor and protégé was important to the development of a successful mentoring relationship. This is consistent with the findings by Viator (1999) and Stromei (1998). The majority of participants in this program reported that they had contact with their mentor once a month or whenever they had an issue they wanted to discuss. It was also reported that face-to-face meetings were critical to the success of the mentoring relationship particularly in the beginning when the mentor and protégé were developing trust and rapport.
The challenge for many of the participants in this formal mentoring program was the geographic separation from their partner. There were 18 mentoring pairs in the program that were separated by geography. Although the geography presented a challenge to some of the mentoring relationships, the more successful pairs overcame this barrier by being creative and making it work. The strategies they reported using included scheduling time together when the mentor and protégé would be in the same city for a conference or meeting and making use of other forms of firm communication. Some of the mentoring relationships reported a preference for being matched with someone in a different office. They felt that the relationship was more confidential and it was easier to be open and honest without their being any repercussions. However, these relationships did require a strong commitment from the mentor and protégé to make the relationship successful.

2. That if the mentor and the protégé had a strategy and agenda for each of their interactions, the more likely it was that the parties would gain benefit from the interaction. Both the mentors and protégés in this formal mentoring program believed it was important to have an informal agenda when they met to ensure the discussions stayed focused, however, they also reported that it was important to limit the degree of structure for the meetings to prevent them from becoming too forced and contrived. The participants appeared to be more satisfied with casual conversations rather than formally structured discussions and appeared to like being able to have spontaneous meetings similar to informal mentoring relationships.

3. That protégés and mentors who held shared values, beliefs and work ethics would develop more satisfactory relationships than those who did not. The protégés and mentors reported common interests and values as being critical to the success of formal mentoring relationships. This is the basis of how most informal mentoring relationships
develop and based on the results from this study it also appears to be critically important for the development of formal mentoring relationships.

4. That more satisfactory relationships would develop if both parties were committed to the program. The protégés and mentors reported commitment as the third factor influencing the success of formal mentoring relationships. The participants found it helpful that the program was made voluntary as it provided the protégés and mentors with a level of comfort knowing that their partner had not been forced into the relationship. The commitment factor was particularly important for those mentoring pairs that were geographically separated.

Other findings

5. Another interesting finding among the more satisfied mentors and protégés was the fact that the mentor and protégé were from the same functional area. The protégés in these relationships reported that this was helpful as the mentor was in a better position to intervene on behalf of the protégé and better understood the protégé’s job responsibilities and career goals.

6. The feedback from the protégés in this formal mentoring program suggested that the mentors provided both career related and psychosocial functions although slightly greater psychosocial functions were evident from the data. When comparing the results for male and female protégés, the results revealed that the mentors in this program provided more psychosocial functions than career functions for both genders although slightly more psychosocial functions were provided to female protégés. Noe (1988)
also reported that female protégés received more psychosocial benefits from their mentors than male protégés.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify those factors which influence the satisfaction of formal mentoring relationships. To that end, the results showed that regular interaction between the mentors and protégés was important to the satisfaction of the relationship as well as the mentor being readily available to the protégé. This study focused on only two forms of communication, face-to-face meetings and telephone calls, it is possible that there may have been greater interaction between the participants in the program using alternative forms of communication including email and voice mail. Future research should focus and inquire about the frequency and nature of all means of communication between the mentor and protégé and the preferred method of communication.

The finding that some mentoring pairs that were separated by geography were less effective also deserves further exploration given the increasing globalization of organizations. This research did find that in some circumstances long distance relationships did work well. Therefore, it would be useful if future studies focussed on the factors that contribute to making geographically separated mentoring relationships effective.

The results also provide information for HR practitioners and others involved in implementing formal mentoring programs. The findings from this study suggest that there are several ways to increase the likelihood of success for formal mentoring programs by taking certain steps during the design and implementation phases of the program. In the design phase, it is critically important to have leadership support and a champion. The champion needs to be someone at a
senior level within the organization. This person together with other members of the implementation team need to establish some specific business objectives for the program which can then be used to measure the program’s effectiveness. They also need to provide the resources the mentors and protégés need such as training, time and the capacity to meet face-to-face regularly.

The matching process is also critical to the overall success of the program. One of the important steps taken when matching the participants in this study was conducting interviews with both the protégés and mentors to ascertain their needs and preferences. The protégés were more likely to accept their formal mentor if they knew they had input into the decision making process. For those geographically separated pairs, it was important to match protégés with mentors that were somewhat physically proximate to each other. The protégés and mentors were also more satisfied if they shared similar interests and values and this should also be considered during the matching process.

For those involved in implementing a formal mentoring program, the ongoing support provided to the participants throughout the program is important. The participants in this study reported that they would have liked some planned activities for their monthly meetings as they sometimes had difficulty in coming up with discussion topics. Other participants supported the idea that it would have been beneficial to have brought the whole group together again after the initial training. The idea in doing this was to share best practices and provide support to other participants in the program.

It is recommended to HR practitioners that future formal mentoring programs be evaluated to measure longer term results. The evaluative tools need to be in place prior to the implementation of the program and continue beyond the formal program close in order to get an accurate
picture. This could be achieved by comparing the formally mentored group with a control group of individuals that are at a similar stage of development and that do not have formally assigned mentors. The researcher could then monitor the performance, promotions, compensation and turnover of the two groups denoting differences in these areas over multiple time periods.

**Conclusion**

The mentors and protégés in this study indicated that, the key factors leading to the development of a satisfactory mentoring relationship included having common interests and values, being able to have regular face-to-face meetings and mutual commitment to the relationship.

The greatest challenge to having a successful formal mentoring relationship reported by the participants was the geographic separation. Further research needs to be carried out on the factors contributing to the success of geographically separated mentoring relationships.
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