

White Paper Series

THE JOHNSON A. EDOSOMWAN
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI



Mentoring

**A Review of the Science and
the State of the Art**

© 2009 University of Miami

Mentoring – A Review of the Science and the State of the Art

Terri A. Scandura

“Behind every successful person, there is one elementary truth: somewhere, somehow, someone cared about their growth and development. This person was their mentor.”

Dr. Beverley Kaye, *Up is Not the Only Way*, 2004

Mentoring is a relationship between a senior person and a junior person that enhances the junior person's personal learning on the job and career development. Research on mentoring in organizations dates back to the late seventies to early eighties. In 1985, Kathy Kram at Boston University published a book entitled, “Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life” that proved to be a catalyst for much research on mentoring in the management literature. In recent years, the emphasis on mentoring relationships at work has shifted to what mentee's learn on the job – both job-related skills as well as political acumen. Often, much of what is learned is difficult to impart through books or even formal training program. Impactful learning occurs through the transmission of best practices from senior people who have been there to juniors who are eager to learn to navigate the complex organizational world.

Mentoring roles include the career function – skill development and provision of opportunities for visibility such as the mentor having the mentee make a presentation of his or her ideas to upper management. Mentors also provide social support, serving as a sounding board during stressful career transitions or organizational change. Mentors also serve as positive role models – someone that the mentee aspires to be like in the future. In some cases, the mentee may not personally know the role model, but such models may have an important influence on the mentee. For example, Michelle Obama may be an influence on young women as a model of a successful female professional.

Understanding this tripartite approach to mentoring roles is important, particularly when one considers that most successful people have had multiple mentors over the course of their careers and some at the same time. Different mentors may play different roles in one's personal and professional development. For example, one mentor may be a technical guru, another is your source of social support, perhaps a peer mentor. And yet another may be someone you don't even know – a person that is high-ranking in your organization that you emulate. All of these roles are important in a person's professional development. We don't have to accept all advice that a mentor provides. Education is the just that – it is the acceptance or rejection of influence. Mentoring provides the vehicle for exposure to such influences. Mentoring is not cloning; a mentee develops their own special brand of leading which is likely an amalgamation of the positive

influences that have been accepted over the course of time. In this way, we move forward whether it is in the realm of better management practice or a breakthrough in biomedical research. The process is remarkably similar and understandable. So what is this process and where did mentoring begin?

The term, “Mentor” has origins in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, in which Athene takes human form as the trusted senior, Mentor, to Odysseus’ young son, Telemachus. Mentor guides Telemachus to adulthood, showing him how to succeed. Mentor’s goal was to develop confidence in Telemachus so that he can make his way in the world on his own.

“But I shall make my way to Ithaca, so that I may stir up his son a little, and put some confidence in him.” Athene, Book II, the *Odyssey*

Mentoring has been a common practice in the world of work for centuries. In the Middle Ages, apprenticeships were common in which a master teacher imparted skills such as baking bread and laying mortar. And mentoring is common in organizations today. We have learned mentoring to be an active process in all types of organizations – business, hospitals and the government and universities. Mentoring occurs in other cultures as well and appears to be one of the important universal organizational processes that moves back and forth both within and across cultural boundaries.

In numerous research studies, mentoring has been linked with tangible career benefits, such as performance, salary and promotions. Effective mentoring relates to higher job satisfaction, increased loyalty to the company and lower turnover. Mentoring has also been associated with lower stress because of the social support provided particularly important during times of change.

A junior person in an organization should seek out mentoring opportunities. The most important question to consider in deciding who to seek mentoring is “what can I learn from this person?” Compatible working styles and a good rapport with the person are also important. Some characteristics of a good mentor are that the person is approachable, they share information and experiences openly, they have good communication skills, they provide accurate and appropriate feedback, they have technical expertise that you can learn from, they are motivating, encouraging, positive and empowering and they will allocate the necessary time to mentoring. Perhaps above all, you feel that you can trust them.

Remember that mentors – at least the ones you would most like to provide the kind of guidance you need – are busy. You are responsible for driving the process from initiating the relationship to managing the process. Be organized; make an agenda or a list of discussion points before every meeting you have with your mentor. You might get lucky – someone may notice your high level of performance, commitment or talent, but do you

want to leave this to chance? Focus on what you can learn from the person. In initiating the relationship, consider what you have to offer a senior person. What are your strengths? Are you good with numbers, for example? Or are you an excellent communicator? What can you offer the mentor in exchange for her invaluable career advice? This is the secret of what makes the most effective mentoring relationships work and last – it's all about exchange.

So what do mentors look for from a mentee that they want to invest their valuable time in? They tell me that they are looking for a person that takes responsibility for their own personal development, they are motivated, they are good listeners and accept guidance and feedback offered, they want to be challenged, are flexible and open to new ideas and show enthusiasm. However, many mentors are also concerned that mentees have reasonable expectations. What this means is that the mentee set realistic goals (but goals that include stretch goals) and that their enthusiasm for mentoring is tempered by realistic expectations of the mentoring relationship itself. One cannot expect that a mentor will “make it happen” for the mentee. You make it happen. The mentor provides the guidance, feedback and support in this process. Mentees who get this last point are the most successful in gaining the maximum benefits from the mentoring relationship.

In summary, to make the most of mentoring, view this as a process of multiple mentors, and a process grounded in exchange in which you provide value to the mentor and a process that you take responsibility for and manage actively based upon an assessment of your own developmental needs to learn. The focus should be on learning and development. The career progress outcomes will follow.