

Challenges of cross gender Mentoring relationships: When it comes to mentoring, does gender matter?

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring has been identified as a key strategy for career development and organizational advancement. This paper addresses gender specific issues in mentoring through a focused review of cross gender mentoring relationship literature. It highlights the issues and challenges of cross gender mentoring. It also examined the effects of gender composition of mentoring relationships on protégés' perceptions of the degree of role modeling and psychosocial and career development mentoring functions received. Results from this qualitative study put forward that gender plays a major role in mentoring relationship.

Key Words: Cross gender mentoring, Functions of mentoring, Role of gender in mentoring relationship, Barriers to mentoring relationship for women.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is a tool that organizations can use to nurture and grow their people, and it's gaining in popularity. Mentoring is generally thought of as a relationship between a younger, less experienced individual (i.e., the mentee) and an older, more experienced individual (i.e., the mentor). Mentors provide mentees with psychosocial support, such as friendship and acceptance, as well as career development support, such as helping the mentee advance in the organization, providing sponsorship and coaching, setting up challenging assignments, fostering positive visibility, and protecting the mentee from adverse forces (Kram, 1983, 1985).

With the rapid increase in global activity and global competition, there is an increased participation of women in the workforce; however despite this rise in the number of women in organizations, the rate of progression of women in senior management level remains low. Mentoring plays an important role in the career development of an individual; hence one of the reasons for women's stunted career development is because of having less scope of a mentoring relationship. Recognizing that concerted efforts need to be made to assist women in their career development, many organizations have adopted mentoring programs; now the most frequently cited organizational practice offered to address gender differences in advancement (Catalyst, 2011a, 2011b; Finkelstein & Poteet, 2007; MacRae, 2005; Orser, 2000). Women who are mentored enjoy career benefits such as greater compensation, more promotions, higher career satisfaction, greater career and organizational commitment and better work/life balance (Allen, Poteet, Eby, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Forret & de Janasz, 2005). Mentoring has been argued to be crucial for women (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) in that it provides them with guidance on how to gain information and insight, seize power, understand organizational politics, obtain feedback and gain access to resources (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Collins, 1983; Headlam-Wells, 2004; Lineham & Walsh, 1999; Ragins, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Some research studies have shown that mentorship is related to career progress, organizational influence and advancement in organizations. (Burke, 1984; Kram, 1983).

Research has found that gender-role stereotypes can either consciously or unconsciously cause male mentors to assume that their female protégés lack the skills to grasp complex problems; further, when women do succeed, it is frequently attributed more to luck rather than competency

(Deux & Emswiller, 1974; Noe, 1988). Gender-role stereotypes may also prevent male mentors from getting too acquainted with their female protégés. Different socialization practices can also cause dysfunction in the mentoring relationship; female protégés are socialized to use relationship practices (e.g., dependency, nurturing, accommodation), while male mentors are frequently over-protective and paternalistic (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988). Finally, although trust is an essential component of successful mentoring, research has found that male mentors are less likely to trust their female mentees than their male counterparts (Deux & Emswiller, 1974; Noe, 1988).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research has found that gender-role stereotypes can either consciously or unintentionally cause male mentors to assume that their female protégés lack the skills to grasp complex problems; further, when women do succeed, it is commonly attributed more to luck rather than competency (Deux & Emswiller, 1974; Noe, 1988). Gender-role stereotypes may also prevent male mentors from getting too acquainted with their female protégés. Different socialization practices can also cause dysfunction in the mentoring relationship; female protégés are socialized to use relationship practices (e.g., dependency, nurturing, accommodation), while male mentors are frequently over-protective and paternalistic (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988).

1 Mentors and the mentoring relationships

Research and interest in mentoring and development relationships has steadily increased over the past 30 years (Marcinkus Murphy, W, 2012). Carmine (1988), Gehrke (1988), Nankiveil (1997) define mentoring as a process in which one person, usually of superior rank and outstanding achievement, guides the development of an entry level individual seen as the protégé or mentee. However, it has been suggested that the major purpose of mentoring program in work places is to introduce new employees to senior members of the organizations and provide them with information about organizational resources and also to promote interdepartmental discussions that can facilitate the growth of organizations.

2 Functions of mentoring

According to Kram's mentor role theory (1985) mentors can provide two broad categories of mentor functions. They provide career path development functions and psychosocial functions.

Career related functions – According to Kram mentors can provide five specific career development functions: sponsoring, promotions and lateral moves, coaching, protection from adverse forces and create an exposure. Aryee, Wyatt and Stone (1996) also found out that it facilitates career advancement by increasing a protégé's visibility in the protégés knowledge of how to effectively navigate the corporate world, preparing the protégé for career advancement, nominating the protégé for desirable projects, lateral moves and promotions (sponsorships), providing the protégé with assignments that increase their visibility to organizational decision makers and exposing them to future opportunities, providing feedback, sharing ideas and suggesting strategies for accomplishing work objectives etc.

Psychosocial function – Psychosocial functions compose second broad category of mentor functions. It provides emotional and psychological support to the protégé and serves to enhance confidence in the protégés professional role. It enhances the protégé's sense of competence, identity and work role effectiveness. Through this function the mentor acts as a role model for the protégé for appropriate values, attitudes and behaviors. Conveying unconditional positive regard is another function of the mentor. Providing a forum in which the protégé is encouraged to talk openly about anxieties and fears and interacting freely with the protégé at work are some other functions. . These behaviors address interpersonal aspects of the mentoring relationship and enhance the protégé's sense of competence, self-efficacy, and professional and personal development.

Career development functions depends on the mentor's power and position in the organization whereas psychosocial functions depend on quality of the interpersonal relationship and the emotional bond that underlies the relationship. Psychosocial mentoring involves mentor roles such as counsellor or friend, and career related mentoring involves mentor roles such as coach or sponsor (Noe, 1988; Ragins and McFarlin, 1990). When we talk about these both major functions it is very clear that career development function focuses on the organization and the protégé's career and psychosocial functions affect the protégé on a more personal level and extend to other spheres of life, i.e. personal development of protégé. Career-related support contributed to tangible career-outcomes such as promotion and salary increases. Results of

several studies indicate that psychosocial functions were significantly more common in same gender female relationships

3 Women and mentoring relationship

For women, mentoring relationships are particularly important, as gender plays a significant obstacle in career progression of women. A mentor can help the women to deal with the same. Mentors can protect women from discrimination and help them in faster growth process of their career. (Collins, 1983; George & Kummerow, 1981; Halcomb, 1980; Vertz, 1985).

According to existing theory, women face gender-related interpersonal and organizational barriers that may prevent them from developing relationships with potential mentors. Ragins. B. R., 1991) Morrison et al. (1987) coined the term, “the glass ceiling” to explain those barriers of which lack of mentoring was viewed to be one. Other barriers included gender discrimination, family responsibilities and a lack of informal networks.

Research has also demonstrated that mentoring is most effective for women when they are mentored by women. Female mentors can act as role models and have experienced the difficulties and challenges their mentees face (Cooper & Hingley, 1983). Female mentees have less difficulty mirroring "female behaviours" than the “male behaviours” exhibited by their mentors (Cooper & Hingley, 1983). Women mentored by women report greater interpersonal comfort than do women with male mentors (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005; Maccoby, 1990) and receive more psychosocial support and career-development support than do women mentored by men (Finkelstein, L., & Poteet, M. (2007); Okurame, 2007; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Williams, 2001; Tharenou, 2005; Thomas, 1990).

Unfortunately, the paucity of women in senior roles makes it difficult to guarantee that female mentees will find or have access to female mentors. As a consequence, male mentors may be the only option. However, both male mentors and female mentees may be reluctant to enter into a cross-gender mentoring relationship in case it is misconstrued as a sexual advance or involvement, to avoid office gossip and to appease jealous spouses. In fact, Morgan and Davidson (2008) argue that since a good mentoring relationship comes dangerously close to

what characterizes a romantic relationship, cross-gender mentorships should be avoided so as to limit the number of opportunities for the mentoring relationship to go wrong.

Perceived Barriers to mentoring relationship for women

Initiating a relationship requires one of the parties to take the lead, which is often a difficult step.

Given the social conditioning, most women are inhibited from reaching out and seeking guidance from male counterparts. Dearth of women managers in the top restricts aspiring women managers from an opportunity to get women manager as their mentor. Thus choosing a male mentor becomes the only choice.

In cross gender mentoring relationship, women have a number of issues which obstruct them which otherwise is not seen in a same gender mentoring relationship.

Sexual issues being the top of the list, cross gender mentoring relationship may be misconstrued by people as a sexual advancement. The mentor and the mentee can also face problems from spouses who may misunderstand the relationship, and also from coworkers. Cross gender mentoring relationship is highly vulnerable to office gossip which may result in loss of respect, credibility and position, thus blocking the growth and development of both the parties. (Ragins. B. R., 1996)

Inclusion of women in informal networks in the organization like clubs, sports activities; also limits the opportunity to interact with potential male mentors who are part of such informal social settings.

Due to self limiting role that women adapt for making visibility in high profile settings and key projects also makes male mentors shy away from selecting these candidates. The lack of assertion on these forums is construed as lack of capability.

From the very beginning compensation is negotiated at lower level by women. Moreover, they occupy staff positions in human resource, legal, communications, public relations etc which are internal facing roles, while men occupy more of line management and customer facing roles, which are positions for advancement in top corporate offices. Women at top rank are continuously monitored and questioned for her competence and leadership skills. She has to

continuously take on new assignments to prove her abilities. Most of the male counterparts are often doubtful about her decision making skills in difficult situations, her ability to handle stress, her emotional reactions etc. woman leadership is not easily accepted in organizations, women managers exerting influence is not well accepted. To become credible and influential and to gain the cooperation of others, women need to be viewed as likeable. A strong direct approach is often regarded as loud. An expectation exists for a balance of dominance and empathy; toughness and warmth. These transitions can be taxing on a woman's basic orientation and personality.

PURPOSE AND METHOD

This paper is an attempt to understand the issues in Cross Gender mentoring relationships. For purposes of this paper, the authors conducted a focused review of the cross gender mentoring literature. Scholarly and research articles on mentoring were obtained by using electronic databases which included EBESCO, Proquest, PsychINFO, Emerald and JESTOR, Science direct, Wiley online library. In addition, the bibliographies of books and scholarly articles related to mentoring were reviewed.

Role of gender in mentoring relationship

Women employees often lack mentors who can be instrumental for their career advancement. The lack of senior female employees in higher positions in the organizations leave the junior female employees with the option of male mentors, this cross gender mentoring relationship is not very comfortable to female employees from their personal point of view, also it is not well accepted by colleagues and those working in the organization.

Besides, in cross-gender mentoring relationships, the partners must define the boundary between desired levels of intimacy, there is a danger of romantic involvements should the relationship include romantic feelings, then the parties must agree not to act on them to maintain professional relationship.

Cross gender mentorship otherwise known as diversified mentoring relationships can be of two types namely, one with a male mentor and a female protégé and the other with female mentor and a male protégé, the latter being a relatively rare occurrence due to the paucity of women in

senior mentoring positions. This paper mainly concentrates on the issues related to the one-on-one traditional cross-gender mentoring relationships. A primary reason for cross gender mentoring is believed to be shortage of women at upper levels of organizations. Gehrke, N. (1988) observed that men are more likely than women to hold advantageous positions, those involving power, prestige and control over resources. These advantageous positions parallel the situations of likely mentors (Kram, 1985) or in other words make men potential mentors unlike women. Also as rightly pointed out by Ragins (1994) the few available female mentors in the upper levels are overburdened with mentoring requests from large number of women from the lower levels. Another reason that the researchers have cited for shortage of female mentors is that women at higher ranks are unwilling to mentor because they do not want to share the limelight with others, and also because competitive feelings toward other women prevent them from filling this role (Ragins, 1994). Queen Bee Syndrome (Staines, Travis & Jayeraute, 1973 as cited by Raggins, 1994) can only explain this kind of behavior. However an empirical study by Ragins (1994) found no support for this phenomenon. Thus, the shortage of female mentors can be only explained by analyzing and studying the problems that they reportedly face in the organizations.

Complexity in cross gender mentoring

If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversation styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they would speak different genderless (Tannen, 1990). With a mismatched pair like this, the level of trust and confidence needed to attain a meaningful level of communication required in the relationship can never be achieved. There are various problems associated with cross gender mentoring, some of them are sexual attraction, mental disruption and damaging gossip. As this relationship of mentoring is a close relationship by its very nature, it is more susceptible to such attitudes and viewpoints. Stereotypes and attributes about women's abilities to manage is another problem women face in a cross gender mentoring relationship. Women are perceived as not having the managerial abilities, hence they are not very readily accepted in a mentoring relationship.

Another major hindrance in such a relationship is the public image of the relationship, which causes male mentors to avoid such relationship.

Kram (1985) has identified major categories of complexities in cross gender mentoring relationships.

Collusion in stereotypical roles

Men and women are inclined to assume stereotypical roles in relating to each other in work settings if they are not sure of their roles (*Gehrke, N., 1988*). These roles are defined by assumptions and expectations about appropriate behavior about each gender. In a mentoring relationship, where a woman is the mentor and a man is the protégé, men and women's style exist. Whereby women are inclined to do what is asked of them, and many men are inclined to resist even the slightest hint that, anyone especially women is telling them what to do. Stereotypical gender role relationships distort and limit the expected behavior of career development and psychosocial roles.

Limitations of Role Modeling

Women in their early career years face similar dilemmas as their male counterparts, still they face some dilemmas which are unique to them, like a women having to miss work due to her child being ill.

Role modeling involves both interaction and identification (*Speizer, 1981*). When professional and personal dilemmas of both the parties involved in a mentoring relationships are different, interaction concerning how to manage them have limited value because empathy and joint problem solving are difficult to achieve.

Thus in a cross gender mentoring relationship, interaction and identification is less likely to occur.

Intimacy and sexuality concerns

This is another complexity in a cross gender mentoring relationship. The potential for intimacy and sexuality is a source of anxiety for both men and women in a mentoring relationship.

Public Scrutiny

Cross gender mentoring relationships are subject to public scrutiny and suspicion. Results of studies done by Ragins and McFarlin (1990) studied protégé's perception of mentors role and found that cross gender protégé's are less likely than same gender protégé's to report engaging in after work social activities with their mentors due to potential for damaging gossip. Rumours can develop that can be damaging for both individual career.

And this public scrutiny will definitely affect both individuals' perceptions and behaviours and this seriously hampers the potential for quality career and psychosocial support.

Peer Resentment

This problem is faced by women with male mentors, who are working predominantly in male dominated peer groups. Because of competitive environment among peers aspiring to advance, women stand out as receiving special attention if she is regularly coached by a male mentor.

Prerequisites for cross gender mentoring relationships

In order to avoid the potential problems arising from cross gender mentoring relationships, following steps can be taken.

- Mentoring goals must be effectively communicated to all the persons involved.
- The mentor protégé selection process should be as anonymous as possible.
- Commitment to the program by the mentor is another requisite for successful mentoring.
- Permission to withdraw from the program is another important requisite. If any of the parties feel that the program is not benefitting them, they should be able to withdraw from the relationship.
- Cooperation from the entire organization must be solicited for successful mentoring to occur. The rationale for the existence of such a relationship should be known to peers, supervisors and managers.
- Continued evaluation of the program is another important requirement for successful mentoring relationship.
- The final requisite for the relationship is the long term test period of the program, ample time must be permitted to prove itself as an effective management training tool.

CONCLUSION

In most organizations formal arrangement for mentoring programs can be an invaluable tool for management to help new novice professionals. Although these programs are very helpful for the organization as a whole, there are many problems associated with it especially if it is a cross gender relationship. Hence when differences are recognized, conflict resolution mechanisms are taken into account. Continuous exchange of open and honest dialogue between mentor and protégé regardless of gender pairing acts as a catalyst for successful mentoring program.

Effective proactive steps need to be taken in order to ensure that the cross gender mentoring relationship takes shape and it achieves its intended outcome of career advancement and psychosocial development of the individual in the organization.

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