

Twenty-First Century Mentoring

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Mentoring is a vital part of a twenty-first century career. While not everyone equates their relations with a senior colleague or other role model as such, chances are that relationship is a mentorship. Such connections can be made informally through a mentor (teacher) “adopting” a protégé (pupil) or through formal programs created by companies, professional associations, and other organizations.

Mentoring as a concept has changed greatly since its roots in Grecian mythology. The demands of today’s workforce have forced us to adopt mentoring practices. Protégés now require multiple mentors at a single time and change mentors over the lifetime of their career. Recently, mentoring has taken advantage of evolving technology with the introduction of “E-mentoring.”

The Importance of Mentoring

The benefits of mentoring have been highly researched over the last 25 years. Mentoring has been proven to increase job satisfaction, result in better career performance and work commitment, and influence salary.

Informal mentoring is a relationship created when a mentor recognizes characteristics of themselves in an early-career colleague and takes that person “under their wing.” This relationship can also be initiated by an early careerist selecting a senior-level colleague they admire as a role model. In these types of relationships, the mentor or protégé may not recognize it as “mentoring.” An informal mentor may socialize the protégé and help them advance professionally.

In contrast, formal mentoring relationships pair mentors and protégés through programs sponsored by a company or outside organization, such as the mentoring program offered by the Professional Development Panel of AACC International. Organizations have recognized the importance of mentoring, including increased job satisfaction and work commitment, and have sought to replicate the benefits of informal mentoring by creating formal programs. Formal mentoring programs have played an important role in increasing the number of women and minorities in mentoring relationships (4). In addition to recognizing these overlooked groups, formal mentoring has been creating an equal opportunity for all members of an organization to receive guidance, whereas informal mentoring tends to center on the “star performers.”

Developmental Networks

A developmental network may consist of a variety of mentors, including mentors at work, mentors found through other organizations, and mentors found at a range of career levels, and are a solution to the shortcomings of any one mentor. Few mentors are able to satisfy all the needs of an early-career professional. An

ideal mentor would offer career support in the form of sponsoring, which includes recommendations, exposure, and psychosocial support, including counseling, friendship, and role-modeling (3). For numerous reasons, many mentors fail to offer all of these benefits. By seeking the support of multiple mentors, a protégé can diversify what he or she learns from each mentor and be less burdensome on a single person. A network of mentors should be tapped to offer expertise in many areas. The developmental network theory also recognizes that the needs of a protégé will change as he or she advances in his or her career, creating a need for different mentors at different times.

Developmental networks are in part necessitated by the lack of effective mentors. Recent economic forces have pushed would-be mentors to give any time normally devoted to mentoring to their own tasks. Still, workers are required to learn more and need support to accomplish their tasks and grow professionally. By choosing to connect with several mentors, professionals can receive an equivalent amount of guidance from several mentors instead of the traditional single-mentor model.

Through the creation of a developmental network, the protégé has the opportunity to infinitely multiply some of the greatest benefits of mentoring. By working with many mentors, protégés are exposed to many perspectives on a particular topic. Protégés are connected to each mentor’s network of colleagues, giving the protégé excellent connections for employment within his or her given industry.

Developmental networks are not just for young careerists. While early-career professionals can benefit from a network, including their direct managers and suggested mentors, a mid-career professional might want to look for a network involving higher level executives and mentors from outside their organization. A potential protégé at an advanced career level may even look to those in career levels below them; a recent trend shows mid-career employees being taught technological and other skills from their younger counterparts.

A developmental network may contain a combination of both formal and informal mentors. An informal mentor may be sought if the protégé’s assigned mentor is less than attentive. Given the shortage of effective mentors and a need to diversify, it is recommended that protégés look outside their organizations to create their developmental networks. Suzanne de Janasz et al. suggest that protégés seek additional mentoring support from “professional organizations, volunteer groups, or even paid executive career coaches” (1). For example, the mentoring program offered by AACC Intl. is an excellent opportunity to meet and connect with new mentors in the area of grain science.

Internet Technology and Mentoring

Today’s rapidly changing technology offers many new opportunities for the practice of mentoring. Protégés and mentors can now interact through computer-mediated communications (CMC), such as e-mail, chat rooms, blogs, social media, and internet-based programs specifically created to facilitate mentoring. E-mentoring relationships vary from pure CMC to primarily CMC with some other interpersonal interactions (i.e., via phone,

in person) to a mostly face-to-face relationship with some supplemental CMC (2).

There are many benefits to E-mentoring. Specifically, E-mentoring can help transcend barriers. According to Jenny Headlam-Wells et al., "People are less likely to categorise or treat the people they communicate to differently if they cannot see them" (4). This makes E-mentoring an excellent tool for women and minorities. This equal treatment even extends to social ranking, allowing those of a higher status seem more accessible through E-tools, creating an environment where the lower status protégé is more likely to express their opinion. E-mentoring also offers protégés that may feel socially inhibited the chance to avoid face-to-face interaction. Moreover, communications through mediums such as e-mail give individuals the freedom to answer questions when they want to, as opposed to being forced to respond immediately in face-to-face relationships. E-mentoring intertwines with the concept of developmental networks. E-mentoring sites can offer important access to a mentor outside of the protégé's organization, helping create a network of mentors.

AACC Intl. mentors and protégés are encouraged to use E-mentoring as part of a portfolio of communication, including phone calls and face-to-face meetings during AACC Intl. events.

Conclusion

While mentoring practices may differ, the impact of mentoring is evident. Developmental networks are an answer to today's workers' needs, allowing workers to access multiple mentors with a range of expertise. E-mentoring is a natural offshoot of the capabilities of the internet and again offers subsets of the working population the opportunity to be mentored. With 1 billion people on the internet, E-mentoring is an excellent opportunity to cross

racial, demographic, gendered, and geographical barriers and share knowledge in a more relaxed atmosphere. All of these concepts together give twenty-first century mentors and protégés the best chance of making a connection to create successful relationships and careers.

Join the 2010 AACC International Mentoring Program!

Sign up by August 20 to become a mentor or protégé. Matches will be made in September, and all pairs are invited to a special mentoring event during the meeting. More information is available at www.aaccnet.org/membership/mentor.

References

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3. Friday, E., Friday, S., and Green, A. A reconceptualization of mentoring and sponsoring. *Management Decision* 42(5):628, 2004.
4. Headlam-Wells, J., Gosland, G., and Craig, J. "There's magic in the web": E-mentoring for women's career development. *Career Development International* 10(6/7):444, 2005.

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A C. W. Brabender ad appeared here in the printed version of the journal.