



Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal

When mentoring relationships fail to thrive - mentoring, managing and the organizational agenda

Julie Starr

Article information:

To cite this document:

Julie Starr , (2015), "When mentoring relationships fail to thrive – mentoring, managing and the organizational agenda", Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, Vol. 29 Iss 4 pp. 19 - 21

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/DLO-04-2015-0032>

Downloaded on: 07 November 2016, At: 19:58 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 1 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 370 times since 2015*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2015), "The value of mentoring: A mutually beneficial experience for mentor and mentee", Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, Vol. 29 Iss 4 pp. 22-24 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/DLO-04-2015-0039>

(2014), "Exploring the benefits of mentoring activities for the mentor", Career Development International, Vol. 19 Iss 4 pp. 469-490 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/CDI-05-2012-0056>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

When mentoring relationships fail to thrive – mentoring, managing and the organizational agenda

Julie Starr



Julie Starr is Director at Starr Consulting Ltd., Cheltenham, UK.

Are you a mentor or perhaps you are being mentored? Unfortunately, many relationships fail to meet the true intention of mentoring, as objectives of the individual become blurred with the goals of the organization. Effective mentoring builds on a relationship of mutual trust and openness, in support of the mentees' personal and professional growth. It is a relationship where the mentor shares wisdom and insight gained from their own life and work experiences, to help the individual learn and grow. So a mentor's role needs to create a clear focus on the progress and success of the mentee, in service of the mentees personal and professional goals. However, where the relationship is built first on a list of goals from other sources, e.g. human resource, someone's manager, the L&D department; the true potential of a mentor relationship is compromised.

When mentoring becomes managing

In business, the mentor role often becomes confused with managing, where:

- *The relationship is directly influenced by the organizational agenda:* As most company mentor schemes are built on an intention to increase performance or develop talent, then the mentor's attitude and approach is naturally influenced by that, e.g. "this person needs to get better at delegation and building teams".
- *Managing is what the mentor knows how to do:* Managers understand how to have a one to one conversation with someone less senior in the context of line management. So because the conversation "feels" like something they might have with a direct report, they naturally adopt a manager's posture. Literally they will start talking to the mentee as if that person is working for them.
- *The mentee does not fully understand the role of a mentor:* Where the mentee is used to deferring to managers more senior than themselves, it is understandable that they adopt a "subordinate" posture in conversations. When this happens, they are less likely to make requests, challenge for understanding or feel able to share their own inner feelings or concerns.

How do you know if your relationship is managing not mentoring?

Classic signs of a relationship developing into managing include:

- The mentor feels responsible for the results the mentee is getting.
- Conversations begin with actions the mentee has completed since last session, e.g. "I completed the tasks we agreed on last time".

- The mentor has a sense of personal agenda, e.g. “they need to be better at scheduling and planning”.
- Conversational topics focus on tasks and “doing”, with less discussion of personal beliefs, principles and values.
- The mentee feels guilty if they cannot report successes, e.g. “I need to explain why I haven’t done that”.

When we adapt the role we compromise its true intent

When we change the focus or purpose of the role, we move away from the original intention of mentoring. The ancient mentor archetype is illustrated all around us, in film, fiction and fable. Recent characters such as Professor Dumbledore for Harry Potter, or Mr Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*, illustrate this perfectly (Starr, 2014). An effective relationship rests on the synergy of benevolence (from the mentor) and respect (from the mentee). However, when the mentor has an agenda driven by the organization, the quality of benevolence can become secondary to achieving those goals. For example, when I know that, as my mentor, you want me to “raise my game” or perform at a higher level, I might also assume that you want to influence me to do more, or to do things differently. I might worry that you will use your own opinions to try to inform/influence my choices and behaviour (which I may or may not agree with). Where the mentee has their own strong views, or resists the idea of a “second manager”, this can add a further issue, which is lack of respect from the mentee towards the mentor.

Some compromise can be desirable (sometimes)

To confirm: the above factors are only a problem when they are a problem! In some situations, it may actually be desirable for a mentor to take on some of a manager’s agenda. For example, where a manager’s support is reduced or absent, or perhaps where the mentor brings a different range of experience. So the question is less “are you managing or mentoring?” and more “is your relationship effective for your mentee?” This requires that you understand what effective looks like and also stay committed to that by, first, holding initial discussions about the mentee’s personal goals for the relationship.

The mentor may have been given agendas by the scheme administrator or other stakeholders to the assignment and these also should be talked through. During the relationship, regular reviews on how the relationship is working can avoid the build up of misunderstandings. Perhaps most importantly, the mentor needs to stay flexible to the changing needs of the mentee and be willing to renegotiate or change direction.

A need to acknowledge the line manager role

Where the mentee has a formal line manager, this role must be acknowledged and clarified within the context of the mentoring relationship. Of course, the line manager needs to know that mentoring is happening but they also need to understand the intentions of the relationship and how they interact with that. As the line manager normally has a dual role of managing performance and development of the individual, they need to understand how mentoring compliments their own efforts. An appropriate balance of effective communication must be found. For example, a hastily worded e-mail notifying the manager merely of the existence of the relationship is an in-effective short-cut likely to result in confusion and even annoyance. More effective is for the scheme administrator to offer guiding principles to help managers recognize key differences in the role, plus how they support the relationship from a distance. Encouraging dialogue between the manager and the mentee is often positive, e.g. “what support is appropriate here?” However, dialogue solely between the manager and the mentor can confuse agendas and reduce trust between the mentee and the mentor. As a general rule, a mentor’s discussions about the mentee in any form should be either openly disclosed, or else be suitable for sharing, e.g. “if my mentee overheard this I’d be comfortable with that”.

A need to maintain engagement

Whether the dynamic is managing or mentoring, for any relationship to thrive, good levels of engagement help both parties to stay clear about, and aligned with the aims of the mentoring activity. The individual being mentored needs to feel motivated at the prospect of tackling the challenges involved to sustain active effort even when things get difficult, e.g. “to go the extra mile”.

The following are signs of decreased levels of engagement:

- enthusiasm or energy fade, as a sense of value/benefit from the conversations reduces;
- the mentees subsequent action and learning between sessions reduces, as they “disconnect” the conversations from their day to day activity; and
- sessions are cancelled, shortened or routinely rescheduled.

Increasing engagement: the mentor

Where the mentor’s engagement is lower, try revisiting their positive intentions for mentoring, e.g. to contribute, to develop flexibility, to shift their own perceptions, etc. To encourage openness, use a third party, such as the scheme coordinator, their own manager or an external coach. It may be necessary to acknowledge the potential corruption of their own egoic needs (the “what’s in this for me?” factor), as something that is causing either boredom or resistance. An effective mentor is able to reduce their own short-term needs for satisfaction or results, and instead stay focused on the on-going needs of the mentee. Over time, the mentor will hopefully gain greater satisfaction from real and lasting results, such as the mentee’s increased maturity or professionalism.

Sometimes, a mentor may grow disheartened at lack of visible results, simply because they are unaware how their mentee is actually benefitting. This is because much of the value to a mentee is less tangible or visible, e.g. increased sense of clarity, more confidence and trust in their thought processes or simply the time and space to talk and be heard.

Increasing engagement: the mentee

Where a mentee’s engagement is low, an informal discussion or review often helps, e.g. “can we talk generally about how this is going?” Here we can refocus on the mentee’s agenda, e.g. “what are the goals here?” or “what are our criteria for success?” Any organizational goals must be balanced with the mentee’s aims, thoughts and feelings. Also remember that the ultimate goal of a mentor is to empower the person they are mentoring. So it is important to maintain responsibility and choice with the mentee, e.g. “what would work better for you? How would you prefer to do this?”

Keywords:
Mentoring,
Development,
Learning,
Archetypes,
Mentees,
Mentors

Summary

The deeper potential of mentoring is to help an individual grow, mature and express innate talent and ability. Both parties must be aware of the authentic purpose of the role, and be guided by its essential principles. These principles include individualized support, trust and empowerment, all of which must be balanced with the organization’s agenda of performance and delivery.

Reference

Starr, J. (2014), *The Mentoring Manual: Your Step-by-Step Guide to Being a Better Mentor*, Pearson Education, Edinburgh.

Corresponding author

Julie Starr can be contacted at: info@starrcon.co.uk