

## Review

# The role of human resource development practitioners in solving ethical concerns in mentoring

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**There are many benefits of mentoring relationships which were documented in previous researches. These mentoring relationships however, may become dysfunctional. In this paper, some of the common ethical issues in the mentoring process which are grouped into three related classes namely: power, access and cultural replication were considered. They are considered in terms of how human resource development (HRD) can take an interventionist position to address these ethical issues of concerns. Moreover, to promote healthy, productive relationships and to prevent the potential for these issues of concerns to arise, four initiatives are suggested. These include recruitment/selection, organizational analysis, training and follow-up / evaluation.**

**Key words:** Power, access, cultural replication, organizational analysis, training, recruitment/ selection, ethics, mentor, mentoring, human resource development (HRD), mentoree.

## INTRODUCTION

The benefits of mentoring relationships have well been researched (Labianca and Brass, 2006; Allen et al., 2004), but the discussion of mentoring is not complete if explorations of ethical concerns that can arise in these developmental relationships are not discussed as these relationships may become dysfunctional (Hezlett and Gibson, 2005; Noe et al., 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003).

Researchers have documented the various benefits derivable from mentoring, experiences and the importance of mentors in mentoree career advancement such as salary, promotions and in providing psychosocial support (Hite, 2004). Career mentoring functions, which include challenging assignments, coaching, exposure, protection and sponsorship, directly assist mentoree career advancement. Psychosocial mentoring functions enhance mentoree's sense of identity and self-worth. They include acceptance and confirmation, counseling, friendship and role modeling. Of recent, scholars have begun to investigate how these mentoring relationships can become dysfunctional and the ethical implications for the individuals and organizations involved (Scandura,

1998; Ragins and Scandura, 1999; Moberg and Velasquez, 2004). Conjecture about how mentoring relationships could be damaging has been augmented by the systematic study of bad mentoring experiences and their consequences. For instance, Eby and her colleagues initially used content analysis to identify fifteen types of negative mentoring experiences (Eby et al., 2000), and in a subsequent study confirmed the grouping of these experiences into five metathemes (Eby et al., 2004). These metathemes were tied empirically to unfavorable outcomes for mentorees (Eby et al., 2004), including intentions to leave the relationship, depressed mood and job withdrawal.

Ethics in mentoring cut across disciplines but the basic concerns are similar. Researchers from psychology (Needels, 1998), adult education (Darwin, 2000), sociology (Conway, 1995) and business (Moberg and Velasquez, 2004; Scandura, 1997) have identified several ethical issues and explained how these ethical issues of concern, arise. For instance, Moberg and Velasquez (2004) identified that the primary ethical concerns relating to mentoring focus on access, that is, mentoring is seen as exclusionary and discriminatory, and abuses in the relationship at times due to power differences. Often, attention turns to ethics when the

**Abbreviation:** HRD, Human resource development.

situation may lead to harmful consequences to individuals or the organization. Of all the ethical issues been addressed in the mentoring literature, few has been written on the role human resource development (HRD) should play in handling these concerns. Thus, it is important and necessary for HRD practitioners to be aware of potential ethical issues of concerns in mentoring and develop strategies to reduce the likelihood for these concerns to occur.

Therefore, this paper gives a brief summary of literature on ethics in mentoring (Moberg and Velasquez, 2004), the importance of HRD's taking a strategic interventionist stance in dealing with ethical issues arising from mentoring relationships and recommendations regarding what HRD practitioners can do to help mentoree and mentors develop productive, ethical relationships. This is addressed under four interventionist approaches; recruitment/selection, organization analysis, training and follow-up/evaluation.

## ETHICAL ISSUES IN MENTORING

Mentoring has been defined as an intense, dyadic relationship in which a more senior experienced person, called a mentor, provides support and assistance to a more junior, less experienced colleague, referred to as a mentoree (Russell and Adams, 1997; Noe et al., 2002). In other words, typical mentoring relationship develops when an experienced senior member in an organization provides career and psychosocial support to a less experienced juniors member of an organization. Mentoring is described as a positive interaction that has the potential to yield participant satisfaction and work related benefits, depending on the quality of the mentoring relationship (Ragins et al., 2002). Ragins (1997) indicated that mentoring is an important factor in career advancement.

"It is generally agreed that mentoring is the most intense and powerful one-on-one developmental relationship, entailing the most influence, identification and emotional involvement" (Wanberg et al., 2003).

Criticism and speculation about the concept of mentoring is brought about by recognition of variability in relationship quality.

Several ethical issues have been identified in the mentoring literature but discerning how prevalent these dilemmas are, have not been easy because few empirical studies have been published on this aspect of mentoring. These few ones published had indicated the need to further explore into this area.

For instance, a study designed intentionally to investigate negative mentoring experiences indicated that more than half of the reported mentoree have at least one negative mentoring experience (Eby et al., 2000).

However, a review of literature reveals concerns that can be grouped into three interrelated categories: power,

access and cultural replication.

## Power

Most mentoring relationships involve an unequal balance of power and described the relationship "as a power exchange a power- dependent relationship imbalanced in the direction of the mentor due to his or her greater supply of valued resources". Ragins (1997), admitted that the relationship between power and mentoring is complex, and the power differential that exist in most mentoring relationships is worsened when race/ethnicity, gender or organizational culture enter into the mix.

Ragins (1997) and Scandura (1998) suggested that unequal power is the likely cause of many ethical implications in cross-gender mentoring and in cross- race mentoring. Common concerns in cross- gender mentoring include that the relationship may become intimate, resulting in sexual harassment (Giscombe and Mattis, 2002). Both (that is cross- race and cross-gender mentoring) add historic racial complexities to the already complicated concerns of mixed gender relationships (Bauer, 1999). However, power differences in mentoring relationship are a natural phenomenon but when power is abused by one of the party's involved, ethical concerns arise. Moberg and Velasquez (2004) suggested that a mentor has greater responsibility to ensure that the relationship remains healthy and ethical because the potential for abuse of power resides typically with the mentor as a result of the position he or she occupies. Moreover, researches have suggested that mentoree can as well abuse power. Beech and Brockbank (1999) in a study analyzed four (4) mentoring relationships from a power/knowledge viewpoint and discovered that some mentoree gained power and used it to obstruct meaningful relationships with their mentors. For instance, a situation whereby a mentoree becomes more knowledgeable, sees less value in the mentoring interaction and begins to withhold information from his/her mentors and eventually withdraws from the relationship. Eby and McManus (2004) confirmed the potential for mentoree to use their power to derail the mentoring relationship through exploitation, sabotage, egocentric behavior and deception.

They pointed out that descriptions of mentorees behaviours indicate that they tend to be "subtle and covert" in their negative actions, "reflective of the differential power between mentors and mentoree (Eby and McManus, 2004). Not only that, the consequences of an imbalance of power may result in dysfunctional behaviours.

Eby and Allen (2002); Eby et al. (2004) clearly identified those behaviours considered unethical. In a study examining mentoree perceptions of negative mentoring experiences, Eby and Allen (2002) clustered common unethical mentor behaviours under distancing/ manipulative

behavior and these include deceit, sabotage, general abuse of power, credit taking and intentional exclusion. They concluded that these behaviours are unethical because they appear to be bad intent on the part of the mentor. Specific examples of these types of dysfunctional behaviours includes not allowing the mentoree autonomy (Moberg and Velasquez, 2004), encourage overdependence (Scandura, 1998), expecting the mentoree to be just like him or her (Ragins and Scandura, 1997) and the mentor abdicating responsibility or attempting to capitalize on the mentoree's skills for his or her own gain. This may result in jealousy, neglect, inappropriate credit taking or violation of confidentiality (Eby et al., 2000; Ragins and Scandura, 1999; Scandura, 1998). They concluded that though the intentions behind these behaviours may be good or bad, they still result in dysfunctional relationship with ethical implications.

### Access

Access to mentoring is another ethical concern in organizations. Johnson (2002) suggested that mentors have a tendency to choose mentoree who is similar to themselves in background and interests. Studies conducted by Giscombe and Mattis (2002); Hite (2004); Ragins (1997) and Ragins and Cotton (1991) addressed the challenges facing women and underrepresented groups in gaining access to mentors. Because mentors are high-ranking individuals within organizations, and are of certain backgrounds and disciplines, it is likely that many chosen mentoree will be of the same background and interests. Assigned, cross-gender or cross-race mentor-mentoree relationships as in formal mentoring programs frequently are less close than those formed through informal mutual choices (Ragins and Cotton, 1999).

However, this may vary depending on the individuals involved and the time the relationship has to develop as many formal mentoring relationships are time limited and may not last long enough for close ties to be nurtured. In effect, mentoree in these relationships often receive fewer career advantages and less psychosocial support from the mentoring experience, and the limited number of upper level staff members from traditionally underrepresented groups may be inundated with mentoring requests they cannot fulfill from non-majority mentoree seeking someone like themselves for guidance and support. (Needels, 1998)

### Cultural replication

This suggests that mentoring relationship has a negative effect when it reinforces unquestioning acceptance of the existing culture. Darwin (2000) suggested from a functionalist perspective that mentoring relationship is a means of ensuring that mentoree learn how to fit into the corporate culture, thereby resulting in the maintenance of

existing power structure as these hierarchical relationships perpetuate the status quo.

Ragins (1997) advocated diversified mentoring relationships but acknowledged that these may "promote assimilation of minority mentoree to the dominant culture and can undermine the preservation of independent cultures in organizations. In the same vein, Hegstad and Wentling (2004) expressed concern over "sanctioning elitist behaviour" when mentors in power positions maintain "a hegemonic culture that keeps people of different race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation from fully participating". From the various potential consequences of ethical dilemmas as they relate to mentoring earlier considered, it becomes the ethical responsibility of HRD to play an active part in helping the mentorees, mentors and the organization to create and maintain healthy mentoring relationships. These are considered under the following four important initiatives; organizational analysis, training, recruitment/selection and follow up/evaluation.

The potential consequence of ethical dilemmas outlined requires that HRD take on a role that combines strategic intervention and advocacy. Gilley et al., (2002) pointed out the importance of linking HRD to the strategic goals of the organization to increase relevance, credibility and enhance the effect HRD has within the system. Ethical practice requires that HRD have authority to influence mentoring policy as well as to advocate for processes and programs. Again, practitioners must be aware of potential ethical concerns in formal and informal relationships and take responsibility for intervention when appropriate.

### ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

HRD practitioners must lay groundwork in establishing support systems for mentoring relationships and developing ethical formal mentoring programs. They must first determine if the leadership within the organization supports a large scale mentoring program for the purpose of developing employees throughout the system. In other words, this function implies the HRD take on the role of an advocate in clarifying two things:

1. That the intention in establishing a mentoring program is to contribute to the development of mentors and mentoree to benefit the organization's image and ensure compliance with the prevailing culture.
2. That the program will be made available to employees from traditionally underrepresented groups as well as those from the existing majority. This is done to curb the potential for mentors to choose mentoree who most resemble themselves, a practice that perpetuates the traditional power structure and at times marginalizes those who could benefit most from having a mentor to guide them through the organizational system (Ragins, 1997).

HRD practitioners must determine if the organizational culture is conducive to ethical mentoring practice and open to cultural change (Allen and Poteet, 1999), for example do the policies and procedures, reward structures and communication patterns support or inhibit the mentoring processes? Organizational culture has a profound effect on power relationships within the system (Allen and Poteet, 1999). If the system is compatible, a mentoring program will yield marginal results at best and at worst, might damage careers in the process. Hence, assessing the level of organizational support and commitment is a critical factor in the early part of the analysis process.

Moreover, one consideration is the structure of the mentoring relationship. The one-to-one model is most typical in informal relationships and has been adopted for formal programs, other more creative options can help to redefine power distribution in the relationship and ease the burden of mentoring for those in the most senior ranks within the system.

Darwin (2000) reflected on the benefits of peer mentoring as a mechanism that is based less on power and more on expertise and support. Eby and Allen (2002) described "a learning group of four to six employees" led by a more experienced senior member within the organization that meets on a regular basis to share information and experiences. Team mentoring mixes a group of protégés with several mentors. A design that decreases the risk of a "poor match" distributes mentoring responsibilities and opportunities, provides mentoree with the opportunity to learn from different styles, and decreases concerns about favouritism while increasing perceptions of fairness (Bauer, 1999). Therefore, selecting the format that best fits within the parameters of the system is an important factor in creating an ethical, successful program.

## TRAINING

Training is an essential factor again in creating an ethical, successful and effective mentoring program. Bearing in mind that mentoring relationship is a complex one and the stakes are too high to leave success to chance, training must encompass three (3) key areas.

Performances expectations regarding the mentoring process, skills needed in the mentoring relationships and knowledge regarding ethical concerns.

To build successful mentoring relationships, training must focus on building awareness about appropriate mentoring behaviour and clarifying expectations for the mentoree-mentor relationship (Hegstad, 1999; Ragins et al., 2000). For instance, mentors need to be aware of the multiple responsibilities they have agreed to take on as sponsor, coach, learner or teacher, depending on the situation and the needs of mentoree (Conway, 1995). Also, mentoree need to understand the importance of

building healthy mentoring relationship based on trust, honesty and shared learning. Not only that, training for mentors and mentoree must include building awareness of potential ethical concerns in the mentoring relationship and providing guidelines for appropriate behavior to avoid ethical pitfalls. For instance, Hurley and Fagenson- Eland (1996) cited the importance of training both mentors and mentoree on sexual harassment to minimize concerns about sexual coercion as a result of power inequities. Just as professional ethical standards provide behavioural parameters for their constituents, mentoring programs should include clear ethical guidelines for mentors and mentoree in both formal and informal relationships (Moberg and Velasquez, 2004).

Ragins and Scandura (1999) however, suggested the importance of discussing the termination of the mentoring relationship to ensure a smooth outcome. However, not all mentors and mentoree will enter the relationship with the skills and knowledge needed to successfully meet prescribed performance expectations. Allen and Poteet (1999), suggested training for mentors to counter deficiencies in skills or knowledge as Eby et al. (2000) noted that mentor competency was a major reason reported by mentoree for dysfunctional mentoring relationships. Therefore, conducting a training needs assessment for mentors and mentoree would help determine the skill base and knowledge desired for participants in each group. It is in the training that, HRD can be most helpful to those in informal mentoring relationships through disseminating information on ethical standards and best practices, inviting informal mentoring participants to training events or distributing self- study materials.

## RECRUITMENT/SELECTION

In this interventionist role, three focal points tap HRD expertise in the process, these includes determining selection criteria for mentors and mentorees, setting realistic expectations for all involved and matching potential mentorees and mentors.

Inclusive criteria that fit the strategic goals of the organization will be critical in developing a program that upholds HRD's ethical responsibilities and fulfils expectations of organizational justice (Bauer, 1999; Scandura, 1997).

Access to power and availability traditionally have been major requirements for mentor selection, a selection process takes into account the myriad skills required to be a good mentor, including high ethical standards, competence in the industry, willingness to learn and teach and communication skills. (Allen and Poteet, 1999; Mosberg and Velasquez, 2004).

Secondly, clarification of expectations at the recruitment stage is another ethical responsibility of HRD. Potential participants should be clear about the structure

of the proposed mentoring relationship and the time commitment required. Usually, formal mentoring relationships are set for 1 - 2 years time span with the understanding that both the mentor and the mentoree may choose to continue beyond that time span (Conway, 1995).

Studies on watching mentors and mentorees are not definitive about the best method to bring the two groups together.

However, Conway (1995), recommended a formal matching process because it offers more safeguards and opportunities to diversify mentoring relationships than informal, "meet and greet" matching sessions where potential mentors and mentorees gather to select one another.

Thirdly, use of interview addressing skills, needs and expectations of both mentors and mentorees also can be an effective method to form initial mentoring relationships. However, two caveats need to be added to this general recommendation: (a) to avoid ethical dilemmas resulting from multiple role conflict, mentors and mentorees from the same functional unit should not be matched together unless compelled to do so (Conway, 1995; Scandura, 1998). (b) Both mentor and mentoree should have an option to leave the assigned relationship if the match is not compatible (Scandura, 1998).

## FOLLOW-UP/EVALUATION

HRD interventions here must include setting periodic check-ins with mentors and mentorees, identifying an advocate to address problems in relationships, providing updated skills, training as needed and supplying coaching to support ethical and productive interactions among mentors and mentoree.

Good follow-up/ evaluation here suggest the assessment of ethical mentoring program whether it is fulfilling its goals and objectives for which it is set up.

However, for this purpose, Eby et al. (2000) recommended the use of survey feedback and upward appraisal systems as methods for monitoring mentoring relationships.

Not only that, tracking organizational audits and data on the archives such as career opportunities, promotions and salary levels may help determine system results and provide evidence to indicate the degree of inclusiveness and equitability of the mentoring program.

## SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

This paper addresses ethical concerns in the mentoring process for example;

**Cultural replication:** Perpetuates existing power structures.

**Power:** the inherent imbalance of power found in this type of dyadic relationship.

**Access:** limited mentoring opportunities for some individuals.

The potential consequences, for example:

**Power:** This result in dysfunctional behavior such as over dependency, exploitation, jealousy, harassment and violation of confidences to mention a few which ultimately will result in lower relationship satisfaction.

**Access:** This results in (a) limited success of diversity goals in organizations. (b.) denial of an important development activity for underrepresented groups which lead to fewer opportunities for advancement, salary increases, etc.

**Cultural replication:** This may reinforce the "good-old-boy" network and lack of independent cultures within the organization and offer some strategies to incorporate into mentoring endeavours within organizations. The strategies offered include:

1. Organizational analysis which assesses organization's culture to ensure goals/purpose of formal mentoring programs is ethical, beneficial to all parties and conducive to good organizational practice.
2. Training: this discusses dysfunctional mentoring behaviours in training and provides assistance in ways to detect when a relationship is becoming dysfunctional.
3. Recruitment/Selection advocated for alternative forms of mentoring that will provide more opportunities for mentorees to be mentored, use a selection process that ensures mentors and mentorees have the skills and desire to enter into the relationship while
4. Follow-up with mentors and mentorees through periodic meetings, interviews and surveys to determine satisfaction, address arising issues and provide ongoing coaching and training as needed. Therefore, it is recommended that additional empirical research be carried out on how HRD can intervene to ensure a more ethical and effective process of mentoring relationships.

However, Hegstad and Wentling (2004) noted the need for studies that focus on evaluation of mentoring programs and on the cross-cultural aspect of mentoring. Both topics have implications for ethical practice. Mentoring programs should be evaluated from an ethical perspective. For instance, pre and post organizational assessments can track career progress of mentorees, observing how members of underrepresented groups fare compared to their majority counterparts. Additional research addressing the ethical practice of mentoring would enhance knowledge regarding this issue as well as provide guidelines for program implementation.

Finally, emerging research suggest that HRD professionals may want to consider mentoring as a key strategy in their toolkit when working toward the achievement of organizational attraction and retention goals, especially in an organization that has learning as one of its foundational attributes.

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