

Executive Summary of the Research Study

UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP: AN ANALYSIS OF MENTOR
PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

by

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Understanding the Power of Mentorship: An Analysis of Mentor Psychological Characteristics

Abstract

This study was one of the first empirical research endeavors to consider the possibility that there exists an array of psychological characteristics that can uniquely identify successful mentors. It was hypothesized that mentors differ from the general population on certain psychological characteristics and that these characteristics are pivotal in developing successful mentoring relationships. Study participants, identified as successful mentors by the informed opinion of a third person, completed three online psychometric instruments. Quantitative data analyses revealed both statistically and practically significant differences between study participants and the general population in level of self-esteem and altruistic outlook. Study contributions are highlighted by the improvements that can be realized in current professional practice relating to formal mentoring programs. Based on the findings of this study, a mentor screening program, identifying those who showed the greatest mentoring potential, could be devised to augment existing mentoring programs. Refining the process of selecting mentors would not only make the task of establishing programs less complicated, but it would also ensure the quality of those mentors selected. This study also makes a contribution to the literature by demonstrating that mentors can be described in terms of their unique psychological characteristics, not just by the qualities and behaviors that they exhibit. This departure from the existing literature on mentorship serves to add a further dimension to the body of knowledge, as well as providing a new perspective for future research.

Executive Summary

Introduction

It is quite apparent that organizations are becoming far more dependent on the people who make up the organization. The ascendancy of the notion that people are an organization's most valuable resource is underscored by the progressive reliance on information, and thus knowledge, of many of today's industries. Drucker (1964/1994) has long maintained that the effective use of human resources is the key to creating and sustaining a successful organization. Not only is the knowledge possessed by people within an organization becoming the foundation of daily operations, but the human resource is also one of the few remaining elements of the organization that is yet to be fully understood and optimized (Riggio, 2000).

In their endeavors to improve employees' effectiveness, organizations are turning to organizational psychologists for their expertise in refocusing the workplace. To improve employee performance, organizational psychologists typically implement a range of organizational development and human resource management strategies (Riggio, 2000). By implementing these career and personnel development processes, an organization acquires the internal capacity to raise effectiveness and to sustain itself over the long term.

The programs that flow from these development strategies include management training, leadership development programs, teambuilding workshops, and executive coaching. One program that has gained prominence recently is formal mentoring. Mentorship has been described as the art of helping and empowering others to shape their learning behaviors (Kram, 1985). The aim of a formal mentoring program is to utilize unique relationships to contribute to an organization's profitability by promoting knowledge sharing, job satisfaction, and employee retention. These benefits are achieved by smoothing out learning curves, bridging competency gaps, and by encouraging personal growth.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to expand the literature in relation to the power of mentorship, specifically focusing upon understanding the unique psychological characteristics of successful mentors. It was hypothesized that mentors differ from the general population on certain psychological variables. The aim of this study was to compare mentors to the general population on selected variables and provide insights to the question "what makes a good mentor?" Such a contribution to the body of knowledge pertaining to mentorship would provide a baseline for organization-related activities such as selecting or developing mentors for formal mentoring programs. This would subsequently give rise to the likelihood that employees would display greater competence, higher productivity, and elevated levels of workplace satisfaction.

Summary of Analysis

Study participants were drawn from a pool of people identified as a successful mentor by the informed opinion of a third person. Forty-five participants completed three online psychometric instruments, the data from which were compared to existing population data to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the two groups. Quantitative data analyses were conducted using descriptive statistics and parametric inferential statistical methods. Specifically, statistical significance was investigated by using the *distribution of means* comparison as well as through interval estimates utilizing *99% confidence intervals*; and practical significance was appraised using *effect size* indices.

The hypotheses of this research study were organized in a manner that approximated a hierarchy. The Hypothesis Hierarchy for this study consisted of one central, or top-level, hypothesis that was informed by three subordinate (second-level) hypotheses (as displayed in Figure 1).

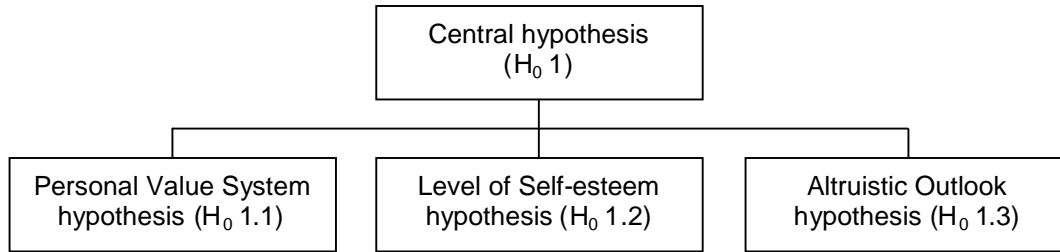


Figure 1. Research study Hypothesis Hierarchy

The central hypothesis of this research study was based on the notion that mentors, those who unselfishly give of their time, knowledge, and experience to others, can be differentiated from the general population on certain psychological variables. The evaluation of the central hypothesis in this present study did not rely upon the results of a particular statistical test, but rather on the evaluation of the three second-level hypotheses within the Hypothesis Hierarchy. These outcomes indicate that distinctions *could* be made between mentors and the general population on the variables of level of self-esteem and altruistic outlook. It is clear that, on the balance of probabilities, discernable differences between successful mentors and the general population are able to be measured.

Discussion

When discussing the characteristics of successful mentors, the abundance of anecdotal evidence wholeheartedly supports the notion that mentors are different to other people. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence will not suffice, but rather must be reinforced by empirical evidence in order for it to stand with credibility in the research and academic arenas.

This study was one of the first empirical research endeavors to consider the possibility that there exists an array of psychological characteristics that can be used to differentiate mentors from non-mentors. To this end, there was scant published research on this topic and little basis for comparison or confirmation of outcomes. As described in the ensuing sections,

the results of this study support the notion that mentors can be differentiated from the general population on certain psychological variables.

Findings

Simply stated, mentor test results from the Self-Esteem Inventory and the Egoism/Altruism Test were quite stunning. When compared to general population data, Z-Test p-values were smaller than 5×10^{-9} for all sub-scales of the Self-Esteem Inventory and 5×10^{-7} for the Egoism/Altruism Test. These results far exceeded the pre-determined hypothesis rejection region represented by an alpha level of 0.01 (1×10^{-2}). The magnitude of these values combined with the clear distinctions between the population means and the 99% confidence interval of the sample means of these instruments, unambiguously supports the notion that mentors differ from the general population.

Ability to Generalize Findings

A key feature in determining the ability to generalize study findings to populations other than the sample population is the identification of common characteristics of study participants. If these characteristics can be shown to also be shared by other populations, there is the possibility that the results might be applicable to these other populations as well. Despite the relative heterogeneity of the sample population, participants shared a number of common characteristics and traits as evidenced by their responses to the demographic survey. This information was aggregated, along with median and modal data, to reveal the profile of a successful mentor. According to participation in this study, a successful mentor is just as likely to be female (45%) as male (55%), he or she is in the 46-60 age group (58%), is married (71%) with children (80%), was mentored him or herself (76%), has mentored five or more protégés (69%), is comfortable or very comfortable in the role of mentor (91%), mentoring comes naturally (84%), and rates his or her mentoring ability as 7.78 on a scale of one to ten. In

addition, over 85% of participants engaged in professional mentoring, within a variety of settings, such as business, academia, and spiritual/religious.

Given the identifying characteristics of the sample population, it is considered that the findings of this research study can be generalized to a large number of English-speaking professional, managerial, and administrative workplaces throughout North America and Australia. Additionally, the results appear to be applicable to both genders, particularly those in the 45+ age group. A final characteristic worthy of note is the computer-literacy of participants. While a pencil-and-paper version of the instruments was available, all participants received invitations and instructions via e-mail and completed the battery of tests online. Accordingly, these results might generalize to populations where a growing number of adults have made the transition to the Information Age.

Implications of the Study

The implication of these findings is that in discussions on effective mentoring, mentors can be described in terms of their unique psychological characteristics, not just by the qualities and behaviors that they display. This is a departure from existing literature on successful mentors, as it serves to add an extra dimension to the body of knowledge, as well as providing a new perspective for future research.

Another implication of this research is that it is possible that screening protocols for potential mentors can be established within formal organizational mentoring programs. Such protocols would be based on variables that exhibited both statistical and practical significance, such as level of self-esteem as measured by the Self-Esteem Inventory and altruistic outlook as measured by the Egoism/Altruism Test. With further investigation, applicable cut-off points could be determined in test scores to identify those individuals most likely to become successful mentors.

In adding this screening tool to the *toolbox* of those entrusted with implementing organizational mentoring programs, a significant step forward is taken in streamlining the mentor selection. Previous systems of mentor selection were at best, time-consuming, and at the worst, non-existent. The outcomes of this study also reveal opportunities for future research in related areas to further contribute to successful formal mentoring programs. These opportunities would include: developing specific mentor selection instruments; designing mentor development programs, either self-paced or group-based, that address deficiencies identified in testing; and analyzing the unique psychological characteristics of successful protégés in order to determine whether this aspect is a contributing factor to the success of mentoring relationships.

Conclusions

When discussing this research study with colleagues and acquaintances over the past years, common themes emerged in these discussions that helped shape the study and focus its intent. The most significant aspect to emerge during this time related to viewing the utility of this study through the lens of organizational psychology. It became apparent that this study could provide a tangible means of improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency; a more complete understanding of mentors would contribute to more effective mentoring relationships within formal mentoring programs. Based on the findings of this study, a mentor screening program, identifying those who showed the greatest mentoring potential, could be devised to augment existing formal mentoring programs.

The selection of mentors in a formal mentoring program is regarded as one of the most critical aspects of the activity (Ganser, 1995; Ibarra, 2000; Rose, 2003; Smith, Howard, & Harrington, 2005). Judiciously selecting the right people to act as mentors can be time-consuming and difficult; however, selecting the wrong people for the task can be disastrous for the program. This is where this study makes its most significant contribution to the established

body of psychological knowledge. Refining the process of selecting mentors would not only make the task of establishing the program less complicated, but it would also ensure the quality of those mentors chosen to participate in the program. The follow-on effects of raising the quality of mentors would be evident in a greater number of successful mentor/protégé pairings. This in turn would logically lead to more knowledgeable, capable, and productive protégés.

Admittedly, this study has done little to contribute to the development of a more cogent theoretical framework for mentorship. Rather, it has highlighted a practical contribution to the development of more effective formal mentoring programs and has given emphasis to a new theme in mentorship research that might serve to influence future theoretical development. In doing so, it is anticipated that this study has made noteworthy contributions to the body of published research in the field of mentorship.

Recommendations for Further Research

The areas for further research identified in the course of this study include the following:

1. Identify other psychological variables that pertain to successful mentors.
2. Locate other instruments that pertain to the identified psychological variables.
3. Develop a specific instrument for screening potential mentors.
4. Determine how a mentor development program can be developed in conjunction with mentor assessment.
5. Conduct a similar study; however, take with a more qualitative approach.
6. Investigate whether successful protégés possess a unique set of psychological characteristics.

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