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Communicating in Mentoring Relationships: A Theory for Enactment

The theory explicated herein postulates that communication is central to the initiation, maintenance, and repair of mentoring relationships. The initiation of mentoring is likened to the initiation of friendships and love relationships in terms of communicating appropriate relational expectations. Because the mentor has the most power in a mentoring relationship, the protégé is anticipated to direct more communicative attempts toward initiating, maintaining, and repairing the relationship than the mentor. Protégées are proposed to be more likely than males to use communicative strategies in achieving their mentoring goals. Mentors are proposed to use communication to initiate, maintain, and repair mentoring relationships if they are invested in the success of their protégés.

Malama is the Hawaiian word for nurturance and care. It is often used to encourage people to *kokua*: to help in efforts to conserve and clean up the ocean and land or to help others within their environment. One can nurture and care for the ocean, for the land, or for others. Care of our environment and of those living in our environment is a part of being human. We nurture and care for our physical environment through conservation and proactive efforts to keep our world clean. We nurture and care for future generations through parenting, teaching, coaching, and mentoring.

The theory presented in this paper focuses on a particular expression of nurturance and care, which is the mentoring relationship. A mentoring relationship is a personal relationship between a more sophisticated mentor and a less advanced protégé. The mentor has achieved personal or professional success and is willing and able to share covert and overt practices that have assisted him or her in becoming successful. The protégé has the potential or desire to learn the methods used by the mentor in becoming personally or professionally successful.

Together, the mentor and protégé form a relationship of care and assistance. In the simplest form the mentor teaches the protégé by demonstration or instruction and the protégé follows the mentor's training. This coaching can be in any area of the mentor's success and can be

straightforward or complex in technique and nuance. The protégé may learn some things quickly, whereas other things may take years to perfect and may never be accomplished.

At the heart of the mentoring relationship is more than a simple exchange of information and accomplishment of ability. At the center of this relationship is the human connection of two people: one more advanced in a particular area, one less advanced; both joined in a common commitment to achieving success. This paper first will consider motivations for entering into a mentoring relationship, followed by the expression of interest for becoming involved in such a relationship and the use of communication in the development and continuance of mentoring relationships.

Entering the Mentoring Relationship

At first glance it may appear that protégés have everything to gain from finding a mentor while mentors have everything to lose. Protégés are in a position to gain valuable insight and experience from their mentors. Previous studies have found that protégés advance more quickly professionally (Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000), achieve higher incomes (Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991, 1992), and overall have more desirable professional outcomes than those not mentored (Hill, Bahniuk, & Dobos, 1989; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Looking for a mentor and trying to initiate a mentoring relationship would be an obvious strategy for becoming successful at whatever one is setting out to do personally or professionally.

Mentors, on the other hand, have many costs to consider when entering into a mentoring relationship, such as the loss of time spent coaching a protégé, vulnerability through sharing hard-earned techniques and secrets, and potentially developing difficulties in one's personal and professional life because of a relationship with a protégé (cf. Kalbfleisch, 2000; Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993). This all is heaped on top of the personal commitment a mentoring relationship implies for the mentor.

Given these costs, what would be the motivation for entering a mentoring relationship? The answers are as varied as there are mentors. Mentors could be motivated internally by altruism and the need to help others (cf. Batson, 1991). They could be motivated by general motivations to do good and to live on through the works of others (McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998). Or, they could be motivated by larger societal or group expectations for mentoring less experienced members (cf. Goto, 1999). Mentoring could also be motivated simply by self-interest, such as the need for an apprentice to help accomplish outcomes or for an entourage to follow in one's wake.

Whatever the reasons for becoming a mentor, the reasons are much more varied and complex than those for being a protégé. The protégé simply wants help in succeeding. The mentor may choose to help because of cultural or group expectations, internal motivations such as generativity and altruism, or literally the need for an apprentice or devotee. There are many more potential protégés desiring help than there are

accomplished masters available and motivated to teach and to coach them. This leads to a relationship that is by its very nature unbalanced, with one partner having much more power than the other. It is reasonable to assume, then, that this power differential, this desire for learning from a limited resource and the time commitment and personal risks of the mentor will be an undercurrent in the communication in a mentoring relationship.

Expressing Interest in a Mentoring Relationship

Common popular advice for finding a mentor is simply to ask a specific person to be a mentor. When dishing out this advice, popular press writers and career counselors do not reflect on the onus that such a request places on the mentor, nor the plethora of potential protégés available who may concurrently be requesting help from this same potential mentor. These writers also do not reflect on the impact of naming or labeling a relationship before it can actually develop naturally.

If mentoring relationships are personal relationships, then the development of such relationships should not be expected to begin so abruptly. Friendships typically do not begin with a request to the proposed friend to be a friend. Romantic relationships typically do not begin with a request for the potential romantic partner to be a love interest. Rather these relationships develop along with the application of relational labels (cf. Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993).

Those who have not been successful in finding a mentor decry the fact that when they ask someone to be their mentor they are put off by claims of “no time” or “no interest” on the part of the mentor. Relationally, what they may be doing by asking someone to be their mentor early in their interactions with this person is equivalent to saying “I love you” too early in an interaction with a romantic interest. In other words, the term, *mentor*, and the phrase, *I love you*, both indicate a move to a more committed relationship—one geared toward reaching success on the part of the protégé, the other geared toward deeper romantic involvement. In both cases naming the desired goal too early in the relationship may result in never achieving this juncture with the partner of interest. In the case of mentoring, requesting a person to be a mentor is likely to occasion a rejection of the request.

A better method of developing a mentoring relationship might be to get to know the potential mentor first and then to allow the relationship to develop instead of first applying the label to the potential mentor. A request that may be more successful in engendering assistance might simply be a request for help on a specific aspect of the area of the potential mentor’s accomplishment. This procedure is more likely to create a helping response without signifying a rapid acceleration of relational development. Over time this help may provide a context for a mentoring

relationship to develop between the person requesting help and the target of this request.

More formally, two propositions can be advanced:

Proposition 1: Generally, requests to a more advanced other to be a mentor to the requestor are likely to be rejected in initial interactions between the advanced other and the requestor.

Proposition 2: Generally, requests to a more advanced other to be a mentor to the requestor are more likely to be rejected than are requests for help on a specific task made by this same requestor.

Another method of establishing a mentoring relationship is through a third party. This may be arranged informally or may be a part of a structured mentoring program. In this case the mentor in question has agreed to be a mentor prior to knowing who his or her protégé will be. This would suggest a general commitment to mentoring (e.g., culture, internal interests) and an availability to commit some time to a mentoring relationship. In the case of a prearranged commitment to being a mentor, one would expect the potential mentor to be more amiable to such a request than in the case where such a commitment has not been prearranged. This leads to the third proposition.

Proposition 3: Requests made to a more advanced other to be a mentor to the requester will be more likely to be accepted when the advanced other previously has agreed with a third party to serve as a mentor in a relationship.

Of course, it is possible that the mentor may be the person who asks a potential protégé to join in a mentoring relationship. It is likely that someone proposing to be a mentor to a protégé might be regarded also as taking a large relational step. However, with less of an onus in the relationship and with less to lose, a potential protégé is likely to respond positively to an offer of either mentorship or help from a potential mentor if the mentor is perceived to have expertise that the protégé desires to master.

These relationships are presented more formally in the following propositions:

Proposition 4: Offers made to a less advanced other to be a protégé are likely to be accepted.

Proposition 5: Offers of help made to a less advanced other are likely to be accepted.

Communication in Ongoing Mentoring Relationships

It would seem that, once a protégé is being helped by a mentor, things would go smoothly for both the protégé and the mentor. However, there

is a “human” side to the equation: Both mentors and protégés are members of a human relationship. Humans have fun, fight, laugh, and cry. Human beings engaged in a personal relationship become jealous, compete, cooperate, learn, become bored, have conflict, and forgive. Mentoring relationships are often treated as static entities, not as relationships enacted by human beings for all of their faults and good qualities that change and develop over time.

It is reasonable to expect that participants in mentoring relationships will have ups and downs, differing desires and goals, and that the power differential in their relationship will affect the communication in the mentoring relationship. These differences may be the most obvious when the mentor and the protégé have conflict or disagreements in their relationship. Kalbfleisch’s (1997) examination of conflict and appeasement in mentoring relationships found that protégés reported using 39 different strategies to mitigate conflict situations with their mentors. In the case of conflict with a mentor, the protégé will have much more to lose if the relationship dissolves than will the mentor, especially if the mentor is closely tied to the protégé’s career success. Given this tie, the protégé would be expected to make more communicative attempts to rectify a situation than would the mentor. Further, it seems that some mentoring relationships might be more salient to develop and nurture than others. If protégé success is a prime component in a mentoring relationship, then the closer the mentor is linked to this success the more a protégé will direct communicative efforts to this relationship.

These relations are articulated in the next two propositions.

Proposition 6: Protégés will be more likely than mentors to direct their conversational goals and communication strategies toward initiating, maintaining, and repairing their mentoring relationship.

Proposition 7: The closer a mentor is linked to a protégé’s career success, the greater the protégé’s communicative attempts to initiate, maintain, and repair a mentoring relationship.

In terms of gender, previous research has suggested that more males are involved in mentoring relationships than are females; that male mentors prefer male protégés; and that female mentors prefer female protégés (Kalbfleisch, 2000). If most mentors are males and these males prefer to mentor males instead of females, then females will have more difficulty finding mentors than will males. If this is the case, it seems that female protégés involved in mentoring relationships will make more communicative attempts to keep such relationships intact than will male protégés. Even if the gender difference in finding mentors is not as pronounced as mentoring research suggests, females still may spend more communica-

tive time and use more interactive avenues to maintain their relationships with their mentors. In the case of conflict, Kalbfleisch (1997) found that female protégés made more attempts to repair the relationships with mentors than did male protégés. It would follow that females may also spend more effort initiating and maintaining their mentoring relationships than males. Thus:

Proposition 8: Female protégées will be more likely than male protégés to direct their conversational goals and communication strategies toward initiating, maintaining, and repairing their relationship with their mentor.

Finally, there is the issue of investment of time and resources in a relationship. If a mentor has invested significant time and resources in a mentoring relationship, she or he may be reluctant to see the relationship end. Such mentors may also expend communicative effort in maintaining and repairing their relationships with mentors. Bell, Golombisky, Singh, and Hirschmann (2000) featured love letters written by a mentor to her protégés telling them how much they meant to her and stressing the importance of their relationship. Kalbfleisch (1997) found that when faced with a protégé's communicative attempts to rectify a conflict, mentors were likely to respond by forgiving, respecting, and holding the protégés in esteem.

Proposition 9: Mentors will be more likely to direct their conversational goals and communication strategies toward maintaining and repairing their relationship when invested in the mentoring relationship.

Mentoring Relationship Futures and Endings

Although much is not known about the daily workings of mentoring relationships, less is known about their endings and futures. Researchers such as Kram (1985) give mentoring relationships stages and a life of approximately 5 years. Others are more optimistic about mentoring relationships continuing and developing into friendships over time. It is possible that the mentorship may never truly end, with the mentor and protégé always serving in the roles of master and disciple. It is also possible that the protégé can eventually help the mentor, and the relationship ultimately may come full circle as the partners in the relationship evolve (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993). New mentoring relationships may form, resulting in limited time and resources for both the mentor and the protégé, and a once viable mentoring relationship may slowly fade away. It is also possible that a mentoring relationship may end badly with one or both partners having negative feelings toward the other.

The outcomes of the mentorship beyond the mastery and success of the protégé are human as well as pragmatic. Will the mentors and protégés eventually become family, friends, enemies, or distant memories? The answers are as diverse as the participants in these relationships. The theory presented here is designed to begin answering some of the questions about communication in mentoring relationships. By taking the first step in addressing communication in the initiation and maintenance of mentoring relationships, the propositions herein can be tested to develop more propositions as we come to a better understanding of the communication and human behavior in mentoring relationships.

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