



EMCC Research Review

Issue 4: Ethics in mentoring



Introduction

Dear Reader,

Having reviewed the positive effect on mentoring in the previous issues of EMCC Research Review, we are now going to dive into the dark side.

We start with an older study from Lillian Eby and colleagues who map out mentees' negative experiences in mentoring relationships. Their study offers an overview of what mentoring practitioners and mentor programme administrators should beware of.

We follow up with a study by Regina O'Neill and Daniel Sankowsky who draw on theories from psychotherapy to understand negative mentoring dynamics. In particular, they introduce us to the "Caligula phenomenon" and the associated concept "theoretical abuse". As we shall see, this is both an enlightening and controversial perspective, which prompts reflection about the nature of mentoring.

If a mentoring relationship abusive, theoretically or otherwise, then why do mentees not simply call the quits on it? This question is addressed in the final reviewed in this issue. The authors Hannah Burk and Lillian Eby make an important contribution, as they investigate mentees' perspectives on what drive them to stay in dysfunctional relationships. Their findings are of particular importance to mentor programme administrators, as they highlight the troubles associated with getting out of mentoring relationships.

I hope this issue of EMCC Research Review triggers reflection and continued discussions about the ethics of mentoring. Certainly, the importance of the topic cannot be overestimated.

Sincerely
Content writer
Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark

Protégés negative experiences

Study: The Protégé's perspective regarding negative mentoring experiences: The development of a taxonomy

By: Lillian T. Eby, Stacy E. MacManus, Shana A. Simon and Joyce E. A. Russell

Published in: Journal of Vocational Behavior, 2000, vol. 57, pp. 1-21

Introduction

The study starts from the premise that intense personal relationships such as mentoring are bound to include both positive and negative experiences of smaller or larger magnitude. They stress that it is an oversimplification to label entire mentoring relationships as either good or bad, and that negative experiences do not signal the impending doom of mentor relationship – even the most positive relationship is bound to involve some negative experiences as well. With this backdrop, they set out to catalogue and categorise negative mentoring experiences as expressed by mentees.

What did the researchers do?

The research was conducted on a group of 156 mentees, 84 of whom had at least one negative mentoring experience. As several of the 84 individuals had more than one negative experience, the study ended up with 164 negative mentoring experiences in total. These were analysed and categorised into 5 meta-themes with a number themes in each.

Main Findings

Below I have summarised the meta-themes and themes:

Meta-theme 1: Poor match

- Theme a: Conflicting values
- Theme b: Different work-styles
- Theme c: Different personalities



The findings pertaining to this theme illustrate that matching is important as poor matches foster negative experience. The findings shows the importance of a certain degree of similarity between mentors and mentees. However, it also prompts the question of what level of similarity is desirable. Certainly, a mentoring relationship can also gain from differences in personality and perspectives.

Meta-theme 2: Distancing behaviour

- Theme a: Neglect
- Theme b: Self-absorption
- Theme c: Intentional exclusion

The themes here revolve around a lack of commitment to the mentorship on behalf of the mentor. One could wonder why mentors exhibiting this type of behaviour, became mentors in the first place.

Meta-theme 3: Manipulative behaviour

- Theme a: Position power tyranny
- Theme b: Inappropriate delegation

Both these negative experiences seems to sound and look like poor leadership skills. The examples pertaining to position power tyranny include “pulling rank” and “managing by intimidation”. The examples of inappropriate delegation include both not delegating enough and delegating everything including the tasks the mentor should do.

Meta-theme 4: Politicking

- Theme a: Sabotage
- Theme b: Credit-taking
- Theme c: Deception

These negative experiences seems to have a common root in Machiavellistic tendencies, in which the mentor uses the mentee to advance his/her own agenda.

Meta-theme 5: Lack of mentor expertise

- Theme a: Interpersonal incompetency
- Theme b: Technical incompetency

The final meta-theme emphasises how important it is for mentor to be competent in interactions. Thus, negative mentoring relationships can emerge from lack of social skills, empathy, communicative abilities etc. However, being socially competent is not enough. A number of mentees pointed out that their mentors simply did not have the technical knowledge required to offer useful guidance. Thus, a combination of social and technical skills seem to be required.

Why is this interesting?

The study offers insight into the negative experiences mentees have had with their mentors, which in itself is interesting. It is also remarkable how frequent some of the negative experiences were. It is rather worrying that 12 % experienced tyranny, and that 16 % experienced neglect. This indicates the importance of selecting and training mentors properly. This is further compounded by the finding that 13 % experienced socially incompetent mentors.

How can you put this into practice?

One practical implication that seems to emerge from the analysis is that mentor programmes should be established with a clear purpose and a clear set rules. Problems pertaining to politicking and manipulative behaviour should be detectable with proper programme oversight.

Moreover, the study demonstrates the importance of the people involved. The match itself is notoriously difficult, but from the analysis, we can confidently say that some degree of similarity in terms values, work style and personality is necessary, although the degree remains uncertain. In addition, it would be useful to be quite careful when screening mentors both in terms of personality but also in terms of purpose more technical competencies.



A final point to address is the importance of matching expectations. If mentees expect a technical mentor, but instead someone with no technical expertise but an interest in personal development, then he/she will be disappointed.

In general, the study demonstrates the value of appropriate mentor programme management ensuring proper selection, matching, basic rules of engagement, and follow up.

Drawbacks

The study is of course one-sided as it focusses on the mentee's perspective. This means that it may sound as if the mentor is to blame for the negative experiences, which is not always the whole story of course. Obviously, in cases of unquestionably abusive mentor behaviour, there is no doubt, about whose "fault" the negative relationship is. However, when it comes to matching, it may be the mentee who is narrow minded or biased. Also, we cannot know whether the disgruntled mentees simply had high expectations of what the mentorship could bring. Moreover, a study by Tammy Allen and colleagues from 2009 investigated mentees' narcissistic entitlement, and showed that this was a significant predictor of mentees' negative mentoring experiences.

The Caligula Phenomenon

Study: The Caligula phenomenon: Mentoring relationships and theoretical abuse

By: Regina O'Neill and Daniel Sankowsky

Published in: Journal of Management Inquiry, 2001, vol. 10, issue 3, pp. 206-216

Introduction

In this article O'Neill and Sankowski introduce the concept "theoretical abuse" as one of the dysfunctional actions that may occur in mentoring relationships. "Theoretical abuse" has its roots in the realm of psychotherapy and it occurs when mentors intentionally or unintentionally put their own interpretive needs ahead of the mentees'. In doing so, they essentially impose meaning on the mentee or simply fail to foster the mentee's independent meaning making thereby suppressing his/her effort to make sense of a situation. Deliberate theoretical abuse is essentially manipulation, but it can also be done inadvertently, for instance when a mentor gets overly enthusiastic about a subject or when the subject is within the mentor's work domain. In these cases enthusiasm and experience lead the mentor to push his/her meaning making through, forgetting about the mentees perspective.

What did the researchers do?

The article is a theoretical contribution to the field and does not dive into any empirics. Thus, the authors rely on existing literature when developing their points, and they do so pursuing three different topics. First, they explore theoretical abuse in relation to meaning making in mentoring relationships. Then, they look into responses to theoretical abuse, and finally, they go through the possible psychological consequences of theoretical abuse.

Main findings:

Theoretical abuse and meaning making

The researchers first explore meaning making pertaining to the mentor's motivation. They argue that mentor's motivation can be broadly categorised as altruistic, political, or



abusive. Theoretical abuse occurs when mentors attempt to suppress mentees meaning about their motivation for mentoring. For instance, suppressing the mentee's perception of the mentor's political motivation would be theoretical abuse.

They then then dive into how theoretical abuse may pertain to mentoring behaviours. Imagine a mentor opening up doors for the mentee, what is typically known as sponsoring, with the partial aim of looking good themselves. If the mentee suspected this, and the mentor completely dismissed it, it would constitute theoretical abuse.

Finally, they look at theoretical abuse in relation to mentee growth. While mentee growth is arguably the main goal of any mentoring relationship, theoretical abuse could happen in this domain as well. Indeed is probably more likely to occur in this domain, in particular in its inadvertent form. A rather recognisable case would be the mentor imposing his interpretation of the mentee's readiness for a challenge on his mentee, without paying attention to the mentee's perception. This is a particularly pertinent issue, because mentoring also involves pushing mentees out of their comfort zone.

Response to psychological abuse

The authors distinguish between three types of mentee responses to theoretical abuse:

1. Contesting: The mentee maintain his/her own perspective
2. Complying: The mentee accepts the mentor's knowledge after some initial doubts
3. Colluding: The mentee fully accepts the mentor's perspective. Critically, colluding will normally entail that the mentee has not been aware that theoretical abuse has taken place

There will naturally be individual differences as to which type of people opt for which type of response. More insecure and agreeable persons will be less likely to contest, meaning that the risk of psychological abuse is larger.

The authors further elaborate on three contextual elements that influence mentees' responses to theoretical abuse. The common thread is that they increase the likelihood of complying and colluding responses to theoretical abuse.

1. Formalisation of relationship: Formal mentorships may present a larger risk in terms of mentees experiencing theoretical abuse, however a well-managed formal mentor program could account for this by ensuring that the termination of the relationship is as easy as possible
2. Hierarchy: Differences in formal, hierarchical position can increase the vulnerability of the mentee. Mentors of superior organisational rank have a certain ethos that makes contesting responses to theoretical abuse less likely. In addition, they tend to have the power to have the mentee fired.
3. Power dynamics: The authors distinguish between three types of power dynamics particularly pertinent in mentoring relationships:
 - a. Symbolic status: Happens when the relationship resembles a child-parent relationship, which entails that the mentee strives to gain the mentor's approval
 - b. Expertise: Pertains not as much to actual knowledge and expertise, but rather to the constraining effects of projecting expertise.
 - c. Advocacy: Occurs when mentor are rhetorically gifted, highly persuasive, and charismatic

Psychological consequences of theoretical abuse

The authors point out that the consequences of psychological abuse can be rather serious, either way mentee should to it. Contesting could lead to the termination of the relationship and mentor retaliation. While unpleasant, these consequences are arguably less significant compared to the complying and colluding responses. One consequence is lowered mentee self-esteem, which is further exacerbated by the fact that mentees with lower self-esteem are more likely to collude or comply with mentor's theoretical abuse. This is coupled with feelings of being exploited. Moreover, they point out that this can lead to "learned helplessness" – the mentee internalises all failures and assumes they *are* failure a failure. This is particularly pertinent in relationships with narcissistic mentors, who have an ability to shift blame to others.



Finally, theoretical abuse is likely to discourage the mentee from engaging in mentoring relationships for obvious reasons.

Why is this interesting?

Theoretical abuse is an interesting topic because it causes reflection about mentoring practices. Assuming that most mentors reading engage in mentoring for benevolent reasons, the inadvertent aspect of theoretical abuse is particularly valuable to consider. A mentor's passion for personal development combined with the power position built into the role may certainly give rise to elements of theoretical abuse. Knowing the concept is an important first step in preventing it from occurring.

The concept also highlights the importance of investing the proper amount of HR-resources in mentor program management. This goes both for proper mentor selection and training, but also offering support for mentees, who might feel they have no one to turn to in the organisation should they experience theoretical abuse. Finally, offering supervision sequences with mentors could help mitigate the risk of inadvertent theoretical abuse.

How can you put this into practice?

Anyone involved in mentoring reading this, can probably think of times when theoretical abuse has occurred at some point, mostly inadvertently I presume. A number of practical initiatives can be done to prevent theoretical abuse the two most apparent ones being:

- **Mentor humility:** Simply being aware of the power position implied by being a mentor is an important first step. Treating this position with humility implies being very cautious about imposing meaning onto mentees. Also being aware of the power dynamics, should make the mentor more attuned to the subtle means of resistance to theoretical abuse that mentees employ.
- **Openly talking about it:** As most theoretical abuse (hopefully) happens inadvertently, fostering a relationship in which it is fair game to talk it seems like a preventive mechanism. For example, the mentor could encourage the mentee to contest his/her opinions. Another example could be to agree that the mentee can openly say that he/she feels that the mentor is imposing meanings, also after it

has occurred. Finally, the mentor should promise that either of these actions do not have negative consequences.

Drawbacks

The concept of theoretical abuse is rather difficult to handle in the everyday practice of mentoring, as it is not immediately visible when it taken place inadvertently. One can also readily imagine, how fear of theoretical abuse on the part of the mentor can lead to inertia, stalling progress in the mentorship.

Moreover, despite the usefulness of the concept, it is not going to change the behaviours of the dissocial mentors with narcissistic or Machiavellistic tendencies. It may however help the mentee beware if they are being subtly manipulated.



Why do mentees stay in dysfunctional relationships?

Study: What keeps people in mentoring relationships when bad things happen? A field study from a protégé's perspective

By: Hannah G. Burk and Lillian T. Eby

Published in: Journal of Vocational Behavior, 2010, vol. 77, pp. 437-446

Introduction

In this study, Burk and Eby investigate the remarkable question of why mentees stay in negative mentor relationships. The negative effects of dysfunctional mentorships are well-known, and surely mentees must experience these first-hand. So why do not pack their things and leave?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers surveyed a total of 149 mentees currently in mentorships. The mentee were asked to which extent they had experienced a number of different negative experiences including: General dysfunction, mismatch, lack of mentor experience, manipulation, and distancing behaviour. They were also asked about two different reasons for not leaving: Perceived alternatives and fear of retaliation.

Main findings:

- General dysfunction, mismatch in the dyad, and lack of mentor experience increased intention to leave.
- On the other hand, manipulation and distancing behaviours had no significant impact on intention to leave.
- Perceived alternatives moderated the response to mismatch, so that when perceived alternatives were low, intention to leave is low as well. However, when the number of perceived alternatives is high, the intention to leave because of a mismatch is also high.

- Fear of retaliation moderates the response to mentor manipulation, so that when fear of retaliation is increases, the intention to leave due to manipulation decreases. When fear of retaliation is, the opposite effect is seen.
- Contrary to what one might think, when fear of retaliation increases, the intention to leave because of distancing behaviour is strengthened.

Why is this interesting?

The core question posed in the article is interesting, because it would be easy to assume that mentees in negative mentor relationships could just quit it and leave it behind. The study shows that it is not as simple as that. Therefore, it provides valuable information to mentor program managers, who should probably be somewhat more proactive when facilitating organisational mentorships.

Also, since most mentorships will involve both positive and negative experiences, it is interesting to see that negative experiences increased quitting intentions while holding the positive experiences constant.

How can you put this into practice?

The study indicates that lack of perceived alternatives and fear of retaliation may induce members to stay in negative mentorships, so how can this be avoided?

First, it seems like a good idea for mentor program managers to ensure that there always other mentor options available. Having done so, it is probably advisable to ensure that mentees feel free to change mentors. This leads on to a second point; mentees should never fear retaliation. In formal mentorships, this is the job of the program manager, however it may be more difficult to ensure in informal relationships.

Drawbacks

The study should not discourage anyone from participating in mentorships, although it demonstrates the risks of being caught up in a dysfunctional relationship, one cannot get out of. The benefits from being mentored generally outweigh the risks.



Conclusion

In this review, we have gone through a typology for categorising and understanding negative experiences in mentoring. This should help mentor program managers tune in on the problems that are most likely to occur and engage in the necessary preventive measures. The notion of theoretical abuse certainly triggered some reflection on my part as a mentor. In particular, inadvertent theoretical abuse is something one should consider, although it should not lead to complete inertia. Finally, it is important to remember that mentees are always able to terminate a negative relationship, either because of fear retaliation or because they do not feel they have any alternatives.

In summary, this research review has illuminated some of the potential dark sides of organisational mentoring. The general conclusion seems to be that mentor program managers need to be critically aware of these and instate preventive measures. It appears that proper selection of mentors, proper training, clear guidelines, and consistent monitoring should be a priority. Of course, one cannot eliminate the risk, but minimising it and detecting negative behaviours early should be a priority. Things are a bit more difficult in informal mentorships, since there is no set structure in place. In this case, having an HR department, and/or an immediate supervisor, to whom one can turn in case of abusive mentors, should be a priority.