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Protégés' and mentors' reactions to participating in formal mentoring programs: A qualitative investigation[☆]

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Abstract

Mentors and protégés from two formal mentoring programs were interviewed about the benefits associated with program participation, problems encountered in the program, and recommendations for program improvements. The most commonly reported benefits for protégés included learning, coaching, career planning, and psychosocial support. Mentors most frequently reported learning, developing a personal relationship, personal gratification, and enhanced managerial skills. Both groups identified a range of problems including mentor–protégé mismatches, scheduling difficulties, and geographic distance. Unique problems were also identified, including mentor neglect (by protégés), unmet expectations (by protégés), structural separation from the mentor (by protégés), and feelings of personal inadequacy (by mentors). Finally, suggestions for program improvement were identified such as clearer communication of program objectives, better matching, targeted participation in the program, and better program monitoring. Findings are discussed in terms of what we currently know about informal mentoring and implications for mentoring theory. Suggestions for mentoring practice are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring is an intense interpersonal relationship where a more senior individual (the mentor) provides guidance and support to a more junior organizational member (the protégé) (Kram, 1985). In addition to providing career guidance and personal support, mentoring can facilitate socialization into the organization (McManus & Russell, 1997; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993) and be a mechanism for on-the-job training for protégés (Eddy, Tannenbaum, Alliger, D'Abate, & Givens, 2001). Mentoring is also related to important protégé outcomes, including both subjective (e.g., job satisfaction, career satisfaction) and objective (e.g., salary, promotion rate) indicators of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lima, & Lenz, 2004). In an effort to capitalize on the benefits of mentoring, many major U.S. corporations such as Wachovia Corporation, MTV Networks, Lockheed-Martin, American Airlines, Bank of America, Charles Schwab, Marriott International, Sarah Lee, and Proctor and Gamble have formal mentoring programs in an effort to attract, develop, and retain high quality employees (Eddy et al., 2001).

While formal mentoring programs are used extensively as a career development tool, most of the empirical research is either based on *informal or spontaneously developed* mentoring relationships or has failed to ask protégés whether or not they are involved in formal or informal relationships (Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). This represents a gap in the literature since formal and informal mentorships differ in terms of how the relationship is initiated (e.g., spontaneous attraction versus third-party matching), the structure of the relationship (e.g., relationship length, contracting goals), and other relational characteristics (e.g., formality of interactions) (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). These factors may influence the benefits obtained through participation in formal mentoring programs for mentors and protégés, and contribute to relationship problems such as poor interpersonal fit or lack of perceived commitment to the relationship. Thus, rather than assume that formal relationships mirror informal ones, we concur with Wanberg and colleagues (2003) and propose that it is essential to examine formal mentoring relationships in their own right. This will allow the empirically based development of theory and empirical research on formal mentoring.

Given the limited research on formal mentoring programs and the repeated call for empirical research on the topic (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003), the present study provides an examination of the benefits and problems associated with participation in formal mentoring programs. Because so little is known about formal mentoring programs we take a qualitative, exploratory approach. Qualitative research is particularly useful in the early stages of research, such as the case here, where the identification of relevant variables and contextual conditions related to the phenomenon are important (Babbie, 2001).

There are several unique characteristics of the present study. First, data were obtained using in depth interviews with program participants, providing a rich source of qualitative data. Second, we examined both protégés' and mentors' experiences. To our knowledge, no published research has investigated mentors' experiences in formal mentoring programs yet scholars repeatedly call for the inclusion of their perspective. Third, protégés and mentors were asked questions about how the formal mentoring program was designed and implemented, along with suggestions for improvement. The focus on specific program characteristics adds to a small body of empirical research on formal mentoring program characteristics (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2004a, 2004b; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

2. Understanding formal mentoring programs in organizations

In the sections that follow we first discuss formal mentoring and what we know about such programs based on existing empirical research. Then we outline the distinctions between formal and informal mentoring to highlight how an in-depth study of formal mentoring can contribute to the existing literature on mentoring.

2.1. What is formal mentoring?

Formal mentoring refers to organizationally initiated efforts to match mentors and protégés. Eligibility for participation varies across organizations with some companies allowing anyone in the organization to assume the role of mentor or protégé and other companies having screening criteria such as job performance, nomination by others, or job type (Eddy et al., 2001). Formal mentoring programs have various goals such as talent development, improvement of employee knowledge, skills, and abilities, employee retention, and diversity enhancement (Eddy et al., 2001). Further, formal mentorships often have contracted goals and a specific timeline (Murray, 1991; Zey, 1985) as well as guidelines for interaction frequency and interaction content (Eddy et al., 2001; Ragins et al., 2000). Finally, some formal programs offer preparatory activities such as orientation and training to help mentor and protégé understand their role obligations and become comfortable with the mentoring process (Allen et al., 2004a, Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2004b; Eddy et al., 2001).

2.2. Empirical research on formal mentoring

Given these unique characteristics of formal mentoring programs it is not surprising that research finds differences between formal and informal mentoring. The general finding is that protégés in informal relationships report greater receiving career-related (e.g., Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and psychosocial mentoring (e.g., Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) compared to those in formal relationships. Only one study that we are aware of compared mentoring outcomes for mentors in formal versus informal relationships and found no significant differences between the two groups (Allen &

Eby, 2003). In terms of relationship problems, Eby, Butts, Lockwood, and Simon (2004) and Eby, Lockwood, and Butts (2004) found that protégés in formal mentorships are more likely to report that their mentor is disinterested, self-absorbed, and neglectful compared to protégés in informal mentorships. Likewise, protégés in formal relationships are also more likely to report that their mentor lacks job-related skills and interpersonal competence. No published research to date has compared relational problems between formal and informal mentors.

2.3. Toward a greater understanding of formal mentoring

Explanations for the observed differences in the benefits and problems between formal and informal mentoring are often attributed to the unique characteristics of formal mentoring relationships. Because they are initiated through a third-party matching process rather than mutual attraction, there may be less interpersonal comfort and identification between formal mentor–protégé pairs (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). This may make it more difficult for mentor and protégé to develop a close, trusting relationship. In addition, the specific goals, timelines, and guidelines associated with many formal mentoring relationships may place boundaries on the interaction between mentor and protégé. This is notable since frequent, high quality interactions in diverse settings are important to the development of a close relationship (Hinde, 1997).

Finally, there may be motivational differences among participants in formal versus informal mentoring relationships. Formal mentors may be less motivated to be in the relationship than informal mentors since they may participate for reasons other than to help protégés grow and develop. For example, mentors may engage in mentoring to obtain organizational recognition or because it is required by the company (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). While not previously discussed in the literature, protégés may also have varied motives for participating in formal mentoring programs. Some may be truly interested in having a developmental relationship with a more senior employee, whereas others may feel obligated to obtain a mentor as part of a diversity initiative or fast-track career development program. This may be particularly true if protégés are nominated to participate in the program by someone in the organization. These characteristics of formal programs may influence the amount and type of mentoring assistance provided by the mentor, as well as protégé receptiveness to the receipt of mentoring.

Given these potential differences between formal and informal mentoring, several topics are particularly important in order to advance theory and research on formal mentoring, as well as guide effective organizational practice. The first involves examining the reported benefits associated with formal mentoring since they may be different from those typically discussed in the literature on informal mentoring. Second, since formal mentorships may be more prone to relationship problems (Eby, Butts, et al., 2004; Eby, Lockwood, et al., 2004) it is important to investigate the types of problems commonly reported by formal mentoring program participants. Answers to these two issues are essential for theory-building since they will provide information on *what* variables are important to consider in future research on formal

mentoring, *how* formal mentoring programs operate, and *why* such programs may be effective or ineffective (Whetten, 1989). Third, research-based practical information to guide the development or improvement of formal mentoring programs is sorely lacking (Allen et al., 2004a, 2004b). Thus, we provide concrete suggestions provided by program participants on how to make formal mentoring programs more effective. In an effort to triangulate our data collection efforts and provide a more complete picture of formal mentoring, these three issues are examined from the perspective of both formal mentors and formal protégés.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Participants came from two different organizations with formal mentoring programs. The industries represented were telecommunications and a nationwide community-based health organization. In both organizations, the mentoring programs were corporate-wide and targeted to high potential employees. Generally, the objectives of the mentoring programs for protégés were: (1) to broaden high potential employees' exposure to other areas of the organization and to senior leadership, (2) to foster career development, and (3) to develop leadership skills. This emphasis on employee learning and development is one of the most commonly reported goals of formal mentoring programs (Eddy et al., 2001; Ragins et al., 2000). The program characteristics in the two organizations were also similar in terms of recruiting and matching participants as well as the degree of structure associated with the formal program. In both organizations participation by mentors and protégés was voluntary, as is the case in many formal mentoring programs (Eddy et al., 2001). Potential mentors were either asked to participate based on their experience, position, or business unit within the organization or expressed interest in participating in the program. Potential protégés were targeted as high potential employees and were participating in various other leadership development programs within the organization. Also consistent with how many other formal mentoring programs are structured, pre-determined criteria were used in making mentor–protégé matches (Eddy et al., 2001). In the nationwide community-based healthcare organization, previously identified high potentials were matched with seasoned senior executives or members of the national strategic management team. In the telecommunications organization director-level high potentials were paired with senior executives and officers. In both organizations individuals were paired with others from different business units or divisions so as to enhance organizational exposure and facilitate learning. In many cases an attempt was also made to create cross-race and cross-gender partnerships.

Initially, program staff identified 60 mentors and 33 protégés who had most recently participated in the formal mentoring program at each organization. A total number of 24 mentors and 39 protégés agreed to participate in in-depth interviews, yielding a response rate of 73% for mentors and 65% for protégés. Company representatives indicated that about 150–200 protégés had participated in the programs

since their inception, so a conservative estimate is that we sampled about 12% of the population of mentors (24/200) and 20% of the population of protégés (39/200). The protégés represented an almost even number of males (51.3%) and females (48.7%); however, the mentors were predominantly male (62.5%). The majority of the sample reported being Caucasian (mentors, 79.2%; protégés, 89.7%). As expected, the average age of the mentors (46.2 years) was higher than the average age of the protégés (39.7 years). Mentors also reported longer company tenure ($M = 19.2$ years) than protégés ($M = 13.5$ years); though the average job tenure for mentors ($M = 2.8$ years) was only slightly higher than that of protégés ($M = 2.4$ years). Regarding their mentoring relationships, 30.8% of protégés and 37.5% of mentors reported that their mentoring relationship was currently on-going at the time of the interviews. Average length of the mentoring relationship was .7 years for mentors and 1.1 years for protégés. This is consistent with reports that formal mentoring programs often contract relationships to last about 1 year (Murray, 1991; Zey, 1985).

3.2. Procedure

Responses to interview questions were part of a program evaluation project. The organizations provided researchers with a list of mentors and protégés who were identified as having been involved in the formal mentoring program either at the time of the study or in the recent past. These employees were contacted via telephone, and, if the employee agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with the interview protocol. One-on-one interviews were conducted via telephone and lasted 30 min on average. After the interview, researchers sent participants notes based on their responses in order to provide participants with the opportunity to review and validate the data. All interviews were tape recorded and the audio tape was transcribed verbatim.

Consistent with previous research using content analysis (e.g., Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Eby & McManus, 2004), two individuals with extensive knowledge of the mentoring literature and experience with content analysis read the written transcripts and independently generated a list of themes to classify participants' responses to the interview questions. Then the two coding schemes were compared and a final coding scheme was developed for use in coding the transcripts. During this process text segments were bracketed and labeled with a code corresponding to the themes identified in the earlier step. The unit of analysis was defined as a meaningful thought, which could include a word, phrase, sentence, or set of sentences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using this procedure, only *unique* meaningful thoughts from the same individual were coded; if the same issue was discussed repeatedly by the same person it was coded only once. The two coders held a series of consensus meetings in order to ensure that they were in agreement regarding which text segments were selected from the transcripts and regarding the categorization of these text segments. The overall hit rate, or percent agreement among the two coders, was acceptable at 82% (76% for protégé data and 86% for mentor data). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

3.3. Materials

The interview questions were developed to, (1) help gain an understanding of the benefits mentors and protégés perceive in their formal mentoring relationship, (2) help gain an understanding of the difficulties mentors and protégés perceive in their formal mentoring relationship, and (3) obtain protégés' and mentors' suggestions for improving the formal mentoring program. The protégé interview consisted of six interview questions, three that asked specifically about the formal mentoring *relationship* [e.g., "Specifically what have you gained from the mentoring experience or what has your mentor (protégé) done to help you develop personally and/or professionally?"; "Now please describe any difficulties you are having/have had with your mentor (protégé)."], and three questions that asked specifically about the formal mentoring *program* (e.g., "Do you have any suggestions for improving the mentoring program?"). Both the mentor interview and protégé interview were structured identically.

4. General discussion of the findings

4.1. Benefits associated with formal mentoring

Protégés reported a total of 148 comments ($M = 3.79$ per protégé) related to benefits whereas mentors reported 45 benefits ($M = 1.87$ per mentor). The number of comments offered by protégés was significantly greater than the number offered by mentors ($t(49) = 7.84, p < .001$).

4.1.1. Common benefits for protégés and mentors

Both protégés and mentors reported Learning as the most common benefit of participating in formal mentoring programs (protégés, 37%; mentors, 43%). The number of comments related to learning by mentors and protégés were not significantly different ($t(61) = 1.95, p = .06$). For both groups learning was described primarily in terms of understanding about different parts of the business and obtaining different perspectives on work-related problems. To illustrate, one protégé commented: "what the program did for me is gave me an opportunity to seek out and become much more informed about things that were going on within (the company) that were not in my immediate line of business." As another example of learning, a protégé noted that: "there are a lot of techniques and problem solving processes that I hadn't really been exposed to before and participating made me very comfortable in thinking analytically about things."

Many of the mentor reports of learning were surprisingly similar. Mentors discussed gaining a new perspective on the organization: "I got a good perspective on how another division is looking at some of the same things that I'm looking at and whether we are looking at them the same or not... it was kind of an eye-opening experience for me" and "...(I gained) some knowledge of operations in other parts of the company...from other places that I have not worked in myself." Other

mentors noted how they gained an appreciation of someone else's perspective in the organization. As one mentor notes:

I gained a lot more understanding of some of the issues that are being faced by my particular mentee and her organization...more about what they are trying to accomplish, what kinds of roadblocks they have. It's just more of a learning experience in terms of what works and what doesn't work when you're establishing new organizations.

These findings of mutual learning in formal mentoring concur with Kram's (1985) discussion of how both mentor and protégé can benefit from an informal mentorship, although she describes co-learning as more common in peer relationships. A few studies of informal mentoring relationships find learning outcomes for both mentors (Allen et al., 1997) and protégés (Lankau & Scandura, 2002) but it is noteworthy that few measures of mentoring functions or benefits include items assessing learning. We extend existing research by demonstrating that learning is a potential benefit for formal mentors and formal protégés. The finding that learning was an important benefit is not surprising given the goals and objectives of the programs studied. Given that these programs had a learning and development focus, participants are likely to enter the program with expectations that learning will occur. No other similarities were found between protégé and mentor reports of benefits.

4.1.2. Unique protégé benefits

Protégés reported some unique benefits that map onto Kram's (1985) classic work on the functions provided by informal mentors. This included Coaching (21%), Psychosocial Support in the form of friendship, acceptance-and-confirmation, and counseling (8%), Exposure and Visibility within the organization (4%), Role Modeling key behaviors (3%), and Sponsorship for promotions (3%). As an illustration, one protégé commented that: "we had some one-on-one time and then small group discussion for general question-and-answer about approaches and philosophy...you know kind of thinking through situations together" (coaching) whereas another described his/her mentor as "...very open and honest with me and very non-judgmental...open and honest dialogue...he made himself vulnerable" (psychosocial support).

Interestingly, protégés also reported several benefits which are not typically discussed as informal mentoring functions (cf. Kram, 1985 or Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). The first of these is Career Planning (13%). This consisted of talking to one's mentor about specific short-term (e.g., "when a job opportunity within the company came up he was really good to talk to about whether he thought it was a good move for me professionally") as well as long-term (e.g., "talking through what I need to do to kind of take the next step in my career allowed me a great opportunity to talk freely about personal and professional problems") career plans. Since the focus of this assistance is career-related, yet the guidance is likely to include personal issues (e.g., work-family concerns, values and life priorities), this benefit seems to include elements of *both* career-related and psychosocial mentoring.

A second protégé benefit not discussed with respect to informal mentoring was the provision of Networking Opportunities (7%), as exemplified in the following quote:

“(my mentor provided) great access to upper level employees. It was a great networking experience.” Perhaps mentors’ efforts to open doors for networking opportunities reflect the growing realization that developing a broad base of contacts is important in order for individuals to remain marketable both within, and outside of, their organizations (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003). Interestingly, this finding is consistent with recent research by Tennenbaum, Crosby, and Gliner (2001) who found that networking support was a distinct mentoring function among graduate student–advisor mentor pairs. Finally, other benefits (5%) were noted by some protégés, including work role clarification, enhanced job performance, and feelings of pride for being selected to participate in the program.

4.1.3. Unique mentor benefits

After learning, the most commonly reported benefit reported by mentors was Developing a Personal Relationship (33%) with protégés. Mentors talked about how it was nice to get to know someone and discussed how they found the relationship personally satisfying. One mentor noted that: “it was interesting to, you know, get to know somebody from another part of the company” and another reported that: “getting to meet and know this individual was a positive for me—both personally and professionally.” These comments are similar to the friendship function described by protégés with respect to informal mentors (Kram, 1985), although they reveal causal, rather than intimate, friendships.

Consistent with the limited research on benefits associated with mentoring others in informal relationships (Allen et al., 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1999), we also found that Personal Gratification (9%) and Enhanced Managerial Skills (9%) were reported by some formal mentors. Personal gratification is different from friendship in that it reflects psychological fulfillment and pride in seeing someone else succeed and appears to meet mentors’ altruistic needs. As one mentor described, “for me personally, I mean I got a good bit of satisfaction out of seeing these people succeed...that was rewarding.” This extends Allen et al.’s (1997) finding that some informal mentors obtained self-satisfaction through helping protégés and demonstrates that similar motives may be operating for some formal mentors. Enhanced managerial skills came in the form of helping the mentor gain a deeper appreciation for the employee’s perspective which enhanced their skills as a manager (e.g., “it just gave me a perspective of how some of my younger managers might be looking at stuff or feeling about stuff”) and be more responsive to the unique needs of diverse employees (e.g., “my mentee has made me a better manager by being able to bounce ideas off her and broadening me as a manager to determine what a single female, as an example, would feel about a particular situation”). Finally, a few mentor comments referred to the fact that mentoring another person allowed one to reflect back on his or her own career, as well as contemplate his or her own strengths and weaknesses (Self-Reflection, 6%). As one mentor described, “probably one of the biggest benefits is some self-reflection on your own leadership skills based on the things that the mentee shares with you.” This bears some similarity to what Ragins and Scandura (1999) label generativity, where mentors report that mentoring others allows them to relive their own experiences through their protégés’ experiences.

4.2. Problems associated with formal mentoring programs

Protégés reported a total of 76 comments related to problems ($M = 1.95$ per protégé) compared to mentors who reported a total of 28 problems ($M = 1.17$ per mentor). There were no significant difference in the number of comments offered by protégés and mentors ($t(61) = 1.87, p = .07$).

4.2.1. Common problems for protégés and mentors

Mentor–Protégé Mismatches is one of the mostly commonly noted problems according to both protégés (24%) and mentors (18%). The number of comments offered by the two groups were not significantly different ($t(61) = .95, p = .35$). As one protégé noted, the formality of the relationship can lead to uncomfortable interactions and a sense of interpersonal discomfort: “...it’s not the kind of a relationship that forms naturally when you have a mentor and a mentee that you know...it feels awkward at times.” Sources of mentor–protégé mismatches included a wide range of differences. For some it involved differences in background as described, by this protégé: “we had very different backgrounds...sometimes that is good and sometimes it is not as good...I think it would have been more helpful for me if we had some common experiences.” For others, mismatches involved age (e.g., “[my mentee] is pretty close to retirement age and I’m not really sure why he was being mentored at this stage of his career”), interests (e.g., “...there weren’t enough common experiences or interests [with my mentor]”), or personality (e.g., “[my mentor] wasn’t really personable”).

The finding that mismatches are somewhat common provides further support for Eby and colleagues’ discovery that poor fit between mentor and protégé is a common problem in mentoring relationships (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2000; Eby, Butts, et al., 2004; Eby, Lockwood, et al., 2004; Eby & McManus, 2004). It is also consistent with research demonstrating that mentor–protégé similarity is an important element in relationship quality (Allen & Eby, 2003) and that mentor–protégé mismatches are associated with protégé reports of less career-related support, psychosocial support, and learning (Eby, Butts, et al., 2004). While no study participants directly mentioned differences in demographic or other power-based status characteristics as a source of mismatches, it is possible that some of the reported mismatches are a function of being in a diversified mentoring relationship (e.g., cross-sex, cross-race) (Ragins, 1997a, 1997b). Unfortunately we could not explore this possibility since we did not have matched mentor–protégé data.

Scheduling Difficulties (17% protégés, 39% mentors) and Geographic Distance (12% protégés, 14% mentors) were also noted by both groups. Interestingly, mentors were more than twice as likely as protégés to report scheduling problems; however, the difference was not statistically significant ($t(60) = -.14, p = .89$) due to relatively low base rates. The finding of more scheduling problems by mentors makes intuitive sense, considering more senior individuals have greater responsibility, and may be pressed for time more than protégés. Mentors may also be more sensitive to the time commitment associated with participating in formal mentoring programs given that they are in the position of providing guidance and support rather than receiving it.

The problem of geographic distance was discussed primarily in terms of hindering the ability to interact with one another and subsequently develop a close relationship (e.g., “...for encouraging a long-term relationship, I really think that distance is a barrier” [mentor]). It was also frequently discussed in conjunction with scheduling difficulties, as exemplified in one mentor’s frustrating comment: “the mentee I am working with, or have tried to work with, is in Atlanta. I am in Tallahassee. There are budget and travel restrictions...which has made it almost impossible (to meet).” These problems may be a function of matching mentors and protégés from different departments and units to avoid favoritism and facilitate learning about other areas of the business. No significant difference was found between mentors and protégés in terms of geographic distance ($t(61) = .34, p = .74$).

4.2.2. Unique protégé problems

Some formal protégés note that the mentor, or mentoring relationship as a whole, did not live up to their expectations (Unmet Expectations, 20%). Formal protégés note that they expected certain benefits (e.g., exposure, company insight) which were not subsequently realized by the relationship. For example, one protégé commented that: “I expected my mentor to maybe introduce me to some other people in the company and open some doors of conversation and that didn’t happen.” Other protégés indicated that they would have behaved differently had *they* been in the role of mentor (e.g., “I don’t think they (the mentors) lived up to what I expected or what *I* would provide to a mentee”). The idea of met expectations is discussed in the mentoring literature as a predictor of relationship effectiveness and trust in mentoring relationships (Young & Perrewé, 2000). Our findings further substantiate the importance of examining met expectations.

As discussed in previous research (e.g., Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2000; Eby, Butts, et al., 2004; Eby, Lockwood, et al., 2004) we also found that some formal protégés report mentor Neglect (12%). Neglect is different from unmet expectations because it deals specifically with a perceived lack of commitment on the part of the mentor, which manifests in ignoring the protégé or seeming “put-out” when interacting with the protégé. Finding evidence of neglect further verifies the problem of having a mentor who appears disinterested and is perceived as not taking the relationship seriously (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2000; Eby, Butts, et al., 2004; Eby, Lockwood, et al., 2004). Perceived mentor neglect is particularly interesting in light of the fact that all protégés in the present study indicated that they did in fact have a mentor. It does not necessarily mean that the mentor may not provide some mentoring functions to protégés, rather that at some point in the relationship the mentor acted in ways that the protégé interpreted as indicating disinterest or lack of commitment. Thus, neglect does not simply reflect the complete absence of mentoring, but rather situations where the protégé perceives disinterest or lack of motivation on the part of the mentor. One protégé noted that: “I just didn’t sense that there was ever a real commitment to take the time... I always felt like it was an inconvenience to him...” Another protégé interpreted his/her mentor’s behavior in the following way: “I really think it was a question of investment. I just perceived a lack of interest on the part of the mentor to be involved in the program.”

Some protégés also discussed Structural Separation (10%) from their formal mentor as a relationship problem. This included the mentor retiring from the organization or making a job change which influenced his or her availability. For example, one protégé expressed disappointment in the relationship because, “(the mentor) ended up taking a position of greater responsibility...he was a little more difficult to get a hold of understandably...the relationship kind of disintegrated once he moved into that role.” The mentoring literature discusses structural separation as one reason for relationship breakdown and termination (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Scandura, 1997). Thus, this finding may be useful in efforts to better understand the separation process associated with formal mentoring relationships. Other problems (5%) include being paired with a cynical mentor (e.g., “he was very dissatisfied with the corporation and so he became rather bitter and cynical...he was so unhappy it was difficult for him to give me a positive outlook on the future of the corporation”) and not spending enough time together (e.g., “Just meeting an hour a month wasn’t sufficient time”), among other things. Eby and colleagues (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2000; Eby, Butts, et al., 2004; Eby, Lockwood, et al., 2004) also documented that having a mentor with “bad attitude” was viewed as a negative experience by some protégés. Further, Allen et al. (2004b) found that protégé accounts of not spending the “right” amount of time with a mentor related to lower relational quality and less mentoring received.

4.2.3. Unique mentor problems

Formal mentors also noted some unique problems. This includes feelings of Personal Inadequacy as a mentor (14%) and Other problems (14%) such as the relationship not being as intense as desired. The finding that some mentors doubted whether they were making a contribution to their protégés’ development has not been discussed in the mentoring literature to date yet represents an interesting phenomenon. It may reflect lack of confidence, inappropriate preparation for the role of mentor, or perhaps a mentor–protégé mismatch. As one mentor noted: “just because you are a mentor doesn’t mean that you are ‘all knowing’. So there’s that point of discomfort where you really weren’t helping as much as you would have liked...feeling like you might be letting your mentee down.” Similar concerns were raised by another mentor: “I did not feel like I was really contributing a whole lot to (my mentee) as a mentor. I really can’t see that he gained anything from the relationship.” While speculative, it is also possible that personal inadequacy is more frequent in formal mentorships since in informal ones mentors not only select their own protégé, they may be more likely to enter into the relationship with the belief that they can help junior employees.

4.3. Suggestions for program improvement

Protégés provided 98 suggestions ($M = 2.51$ per protégé) and mentors provided 69 ($M = 2.87$ per mentor) suggestions for how to improve the program. This difference in the number of comments provided by mentors and protégés was not statistically significant ($t(61) = -.85$, $p = .41$). Unlike the previously discussed results, suggestions for improvement consisted of the same themes for both mentors and

protégés, though the frequencies and content differed in some cases. The themes that emerged from these questions are clearly unique to formal mentoring.

The most frequently mentioned theme for both mentors and protégés is Clearer Communication of Program Objectives (20 and 28% for protégés and mentors, respectively). One issue discussed here was the need for a clearly stated purpose or mission for the program. One protégé sums this idea up by stating: “I don’t think that the program was structured in such a way that people really knew what to do.” Other suggestions included guidelines for meeting frequency (e.g., “I’d like to see...some suggested expectations on the number of contacts and the form they would take and possible topics for discussion” [mentor]; “...exactly how many times you should meet and for how long” [protégé]), guidelines on relationship length (e.g., “I’m not sure what sort of the length of time was (expected)...it kind of dropped off after a while, and I’m not sure if that was the original plan or just entropy” [mentor]), and similar topics.

Several other themes were mentioned with similar frequency across mentors and protégés. In terms of setting up the mentorship, participants discussed the need for Better Matching (protégés, 17%, mentors, 17%). Both mentors and protégés commented that the matching process often seemed haphazard (e.g., “I don’t think that anyone put much thought in the selection process...you know, probably people drew names out of a hat or something” [mentor]). Others wanted greater input in the matching process, as this mentor suggests:

What I think might have been helpful is if the choices of the mentee would have been discussed with us (mentors)...it might have been helpful to have some dialogue on the front-end about this...this is the person and this is the reason why we’re matching this person with you...these are some of the other options.

This finding coincides with recent research by Allen and colleagues which finds that greater input into the match in formal mentorships relates to both receiving and providing more mentoring (Allen et al., 2004b), as well as perceptions of program effectiveness from both the mentor’s and protégé’s perspective (Allen et al., 2004a).

Some mentors and protégés also discussed how they felt unprepared for their respective roles and noted that this might contribute to unrealistic expectations for the program (Clarification of Roles [protégés, 15%, mentors, 13%]). As one protégé notes: “I could see where certain mentees could set the expectations incorrectly or too high and sort of doom it from the get-go.” Clearly delineating role obligations for both parties was also discussed. As noted by one mentor, training may be one way to achieve this goal; “...training...I think that people could have gotten more out of it before you enter the mentoring program...one for mentors, one for mentees...you know this is what a mentoring relationship should be or can be...give them some guideposts along the way.” Substantiating the potential importance of training, a recent empirical study found that training for both mentors and protégé related to more effective formal mentorships (Allen et al., 2004b).

After the match is made, some participants recommend that there be Greater Opportunity to Share Experiences (protégés, 7%, mentors, 10%) and an Orientation

Program (protégés, 1%, mentors, 4%) for both individuals. Some interesting ideas were provided to increase experience sharing, including group meetings with all participants and formal social events to allow for discussion and networking among all program participants. In a review of best practices in formal mentoring in industry, Eddy et al. (2001) found that 58% of organizations provide an orientation for program participants but most (75%) did not provide any sort of follow-up activity such as a refresher session or on-going group events and sessions throughout the mentoring relationship.

Mentors and protégés demonstrated the greatest difference in frequency of comments for the themes Targeted Participation and Program Monitoring. Mentors commented more frequently on Program Monitoring than protégés (mentors, 20%, protégés, 9%); whereas protégés expressed comments related to Targeted Participation more frequently than mentors (protégés, 18%, mentors, 4%). Program monitoring consisted of concerns that the organization was not following up on relationships to ensure that they were going well, the lack of feedback solicited from participants to help improve the program, and a failure to foster a sense of accountability in program participants through frequent check-ins and periodic status report. As one mentor notes:

“...human resources department periodically, maybe even on a yearly basis, (should) come back and get feedback like this to determine if this is a good fit or not a good fit or get feedback on the relationship...whether or not the mentoring relationship was valuable, not only to the mentor but for the mentee as well.”

Organizational support for mentoring has been discussed as an essential component for successful mentorships (Kram, 1985) but we are aware of only one empirical study that has examined such perceptions. That study found that protégés' perceptions of accountability in mentoring relationships predicted the receipt of mentoring and deterred negative experiences (Eby, Lockwood, et al., 2004).

Comments related to targeted participation dealt with efforts to help ensure that program participants were qualified and motivated to participate in the program. Several protégés discussed this issue with respect to assuring that mentors really wanted to be part of the program, as exemplified by this protégé comment:

I think that there has been a problem in getting mentors; so someone who says ‘yeah, I'll do it’...then you take them, but in reality they really don't want to. I don't think that they should make people do it as part of their development.

Other suggestions provided by protégés (11%) and mentors (3%) included better integration of the program with the company culture (e.g., “...hard wire it into the structure of the organization to try to make it work” [protégé], “It's got to be more integrated into our day-to-day business by the leaders and our senior leaders” [mentor]) and strategies to replace mentors who leave the organization. Significant differences in the number of program improvement suggestions were found for Targeted Participation ($t(59) = 2.23$, $p < .05$) and Program Monitoring ($t(61) = -2.45$,

$p < .01$), but not Clearer Communication ($t(61) = -1.49, p = .14$), Better Matching ($t(61) = .95, p = .35$), Clarification of Roles ($t(61) = -.48, p = .63$), or Greater Opportunity to Share Experiences ($t(61) = -.95, p = .35$).

5. Implications for theory development on formal mentoring

The present study makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on workplace mentoring. By focusing specifically on formal mentoring we were able to identify the benefits and costs of mentoring that are uniquely associated with arranged, formal mentorships. Doing so allows us to compare the benefits and costs found here with what we know about informal mentoring. In turn, this provides guidance for future theory development on the distinctions between formal and informal mentoring relationships.

The present study identified numerous benefits and costs that are not typically discussed or measured in research on informal workplace mentoring relationships. For protégés this included career planning assistance by mentors and the provision of networking opportunities as benefits, and unmet expectations, scheduling difficulties, and geographic distance as problems. For mentors unique benefits included developing a personal relationship with protégés whereas distinct problems involved scheduling difficulties, personal inadequacy, and geographic distance. We also did not find some of the commonly discussed benefits and problems referenced in the literature on informal mentoring. For example, among formal protégés there was no discussion of formal mentors providing challenging assignments or providing protection (compare our findings with Kram, 1985; or Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). In terms of formal mentors we did not find mention of developing a loyal base of support or receiving recognition within the organization as benefits (compare our findings with Ragins & Scandura, 1999). In terms of mentoring problems previously identified in the literature we did not find evidence of mentor manipulation or lack of mentor expertise (compare our findings with Eby et al., 2000) or any of the relational problems identified by Eby and McManus (2004) from the mentor's perspective.

These findings may reflect a fundamental difference in the purpose of informal and formal mentorships that is important to explore in future research. Borrowing from Greek mythology, Kram (1985) discusses a mentoring relationship as one where "...a more experienced adult helps the younger individual learn to navigate in the adult world and the world of work" (p. 2). She goes on to cite Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein, and McKee (1978) **('s)work which suggests that the mentoring relationship is the most important relationship in young adulthood and that mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial to both protégé and mentor. Kram also stresses that a critical function that mentors provide for protégés is public support of a protégé's career and advancement within the organization (sponsorship).

In light of our findings, we argue that formal mentoring relationships may serve a much narrower and perhaps different purpose than informal mentorships. While formal mentors may be career allies, we found little evidence that formal mentors act as public sponsors for protégés or take active steps to enhance their promotability or

visibility within the organization. We also found that the benefits for mentors appear to be somewhat limited. Further, there was little evidence that formal mentors played a key role in protégés' long-term career development. Formal mentors simply provided advice, coaching, and perhaps some career planning assistance. We also found little evidence of the deep, intense type of interpersonal relationship that Kram discusses as characterizing some informal mentoring relationships. Thus, we argue that formal mentoring likely serves a rather short-term and more circumscribed purpose for protégés. For some formal protégés this may involve help making some career decisions (career planning), for others it entails exposure to other parts of the business (learning), and for others it involves coaching on day-to-day work challenges. Taken together these observations provide a point of departure for future research and theorizing on the unique aspects of formal mentoring.

6. Implications for practice

Both mentors and protégés provided specific recommendations for improving formal mentoring programs. Some common recommendations included clearer communication of the program's objectives (e.g., timeline, goals and expected outcomes, interaction frequency, general guidance), better monitoring and follow-up with program participants (e.g., periodic check-ins, formal feedback on the program), better matching of mentors and protégés, careful targeting of mentors and protégés to participate in the program, clarification of roles (e.g., training, expectation setting, suggested activities), greater opportunity to share experiences (e.g., informal and structured events for all program participants), and the use of orientation programs. These recommendations provide concrete guidance, based on empirical evidence, for practitioners interested in developing formal mentoring programs.

7. Limitations and conclusions

Several limitations associated with the present study should be noted. First, the findings are based on a relatively small number of protégés ($n = 39$) and mentors ($n = 24$) participating in one of two mentoring programs which touted learning and development as their primary program goals. While this may limit generalizability, it is important to note that our sample size is consistent with, and in many cases larger than, what is typically reported using similar qualitative methods (e.g., compare [Allen et al., 1997](#) to [Kram, 1985](#)). Further, learning and development are two of the most commonly reported goals of formal mentoring programs ([Eddy et al., 2001](#)). Moreover, while only two organizations were sampled they differed considerably. One was a large for-profit telecommunications company and the other was a nationwide community-based voluntary health organization with chartered divisions throughout the country and more than 3400 local units. Moreover, participants in the study came from various geographic areas of the United States and from various divisions within these two large organizations. It is also notable that, on average,

both mentors and protégés had worked in their respective organizations for a relatively long time and had similar job tenures, both of which may place boundary conditions on our findings. This likely reflects the strong promotion from within culture of both organizations and fact that both programs targeted high potential protégés who had already entered the management suite. It may also reflect economic conditions and the associated slow growth that both companies experienced during the time of data collection. A final limitation is our inability to match mentor and protégé data. A fascinating area for future research is an in-depth examination of the relationship between mentor–protégé dyads' experiences in formal mentoring programs.

Notwithstanding these limitations the present study makes an important contribution to research on organizational mentoring. By conducting a qualitative exploration of formal mentoring programs our findings provide research fodder for theory development and future quantitative research on formal mentoring. We also highlight the importance of studying both protégé and mentor in an effort to fully understand formal mentoring; meaningful differences were found between protégés' and mentors' experiences in formal mentoring relationships. Our study also provides many specific recommendations for practice, based on the actual experiences of program participants. While several "how to" books exist on the design and development of formal mentoring programs (e.g., Murray, 1991), these resources are not grounded in empirical research. As such, the present study serves to bridge the important gap between research and practice on formal mentoring programs.

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