Women's Experiences With Mentoring: A Mentoring Framework for Women

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The purpose of this research paper is to discuss women's experiences with mentoring and the conditions that promote and support positive mentoring outcomes. Data were gathered using qualitative semi-structured interviews with women who had a minimum of five years management experience. Mentoring structure, relational connection between mentor and mentee, and perceived value of the mentor within the organization form a successful mentoring framework for women. Informal mentoring situations were identified as most valuable. To more effectively pair mentors and mentees, organizations should consider using a diagnostic instrument and mentees should be surveyed to gain an understanding of their goals.

Keywords: mentoring, women in mentoring, mentoring framework, informal mentoring

INTRODUCTION

Women face distinct challenges in the workplace — challenges that can make it more difficult to access stretch opportunities, networks, resources, etc. Despite the increasing presence of women in the workforce, women continue to be severely underrepresented in senior management positions and evidence shows persistent horizontal and vertical segregation, as well as a pay gap (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018; Segovia-Pérez, et al., 2019). Yet, evidence supports that women add unique value and perspective within organizations. Women shatter groupthink, improve communications dynamics, and reinvigorate organizations in ways that make them more competitive (Whitmarsh, et al, 2007). Clear links to the increased representation of women have also demonstrated positive bottom-line results supporting the belief that women drive performance and contribute to an organization's competitive resources (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2012; Miller & Sisk, 2012). Research shows organizations with a critical mass of top-team gender diversity enjoy better financial performance (Joy, et al., 2007).

Although there have been improvements for women at work, the glass ceiling continues to triumph with the support of several other barriers to the success of women including but not limited to: gender bias and gender stereotyping, sexual harassment, the lack of mentors and role models; the lack of formal career development activities and projects, the exclusion from informal networks; and the perception of leadership style and authenticity, and value associated with male-dominated behaviors and functional roles (Dashper,

2018; Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016; Rhode, 2017; Warner & Corely, 2017). As a result, there has been slow growth in the number of women on boards of directors and top management positions globally (Clevenger & Singh, 2013). The glass ceiling, considered discrimination on the basis of gender, continues to limit the potential of women in the workforce.

Mentoring has been documented as a powerful organizational tool contributing to organizational commitment and loyalty, career advancement and satisfaction, and wellbeing. Mentoring has a positive influence on career outcomes and subjective well-being—for example, promotions, income, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, loyalty, job satisfaction, self-esteem, work stress, information exchange, and work-family conflict (Ashforth, et al., 2016; Srivastava, 2015, Young, 2000, Ragins & Cotton, 1999, Sayan et.al., 2019). Furthermore, high-quality mentoring relationships have a positive effect on desirable organizational and individual outcomes (Amah, 2017). However, mentoring has manifested differently for men and women in the workplace often contributing to the marginalization of women as discussed above. There is a lack of data that provides insights into women's perceptions and experiences with mentoring in organizations and as a result, organizations must evaluate their culture and support mechanisms to promote mentoring benefits to women (Clevenger & Singh, 2013). There is limited research that explores women and their experiences with mentoring, specifically being the mentee, the mentor, and the change of the mentee/mentor relationship throughout career progression. In addition, there is a lack of research that has sought to identify the most critical considerations for women in a mentoring relationship breaking down the complexities and constructing a framework that organizations can embrace to promote greater overall career success for women. Without understanding women's experiences with mentoring, organizations may struggle to promote gender equity in the workplace. Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to capture data to understand women's experiences with mentoring and identify critical considerations necessary for women that result in positive mentoring experiences and outcomes.

Mentoring in Organizations

The existence of mentoring in organizations is an ever-evolving phenomena. Mentoring itself has expanded to include varied forms and hybrid structures such as peer mentoring, cross-gender mentoring, cross-cultural mentoring, mentoring circles, and e-mentoring (Rose & Kram, 2007). Mentoring is a unique work relationship or exchange through which individuals with less experience receive career and personal guidance from mentors with more experience, supporting personal and professional progression and development (Umberd & Rouse, 2016; Young, 2020). In a study by Helms, Arfken, & Bellar (2016), they define mentoring as "a commitment to a whole, long-term process, an ongoing relationship whereby one talks about a mentee's goals and suggests ways to get there and how that path might go,and helping somebody get their confidence back or gain it in the first place" (p. 9). Kram (1985) defined mentors as experienced and knowledgeable individuals who are committed to providing career and psychosocial support to one or more mentees. Overall, mentors build social capital (Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016). Most commonly, mentoring is either formal, meaning established by organizational process, or informal as the relationship is developed between a mentor and a mentee and considered essential to career development (Umberd & Rouse, 2016). Some research states that mentoring is a voluntary relationship that focuses upon long-term goals and capabilities (D'Abate et al.,2003; Clutterbuck, 2004; Audet & Couteret, 2012). Whether voluntary or not, mentoring is a relationship and relationships are understood as giving rise to actionable knowledge that reflects relationship quality such as trust, which has been linked to mentee satisfaction (St. Jean and Audet, 2009).

Formal Mentoring

Formal mentoring, whether targeted or not, is widely believed to have a positive influence on mentees' career outcomes and subjective well-being—for example, promotions, income, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, job satisfaction, self-esteem, work stress, and work-family conflict (Srivastava, 2015, Sayan et.al., 2019). Formal mentoring is also believed to help women overcome deficiencies in network access—for example, to powerful actors or dominant coalitions in the organization—and is therefore proposed as an important means to addressing gender inequality in the

workplace (Noe 1988). Some reported positive aspects of formalized mentoring programs not often associated with informal programs are career planning and networking opportunities (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Negative aspects of formalized mentoring programs in the literature include mismatch of mentor-mentee, scheduling difficulties, and geographic distance (Eby & Lockwood, 2005).

Informal Mentoring

Informal mentorships result from relational connections such as common interests, goals, leadership style, and accomplishments (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016; Young, 2020). Amah (2017) identified during informal mentoring, mentors exhibit career related behaviors (coaching, exposure to challenging assignments, and making mentee visible to gain in organizational benefits), pro-social support (role model, counseling and enhancement of trust) that provided upward mobility, career satisfaction and advancement to mentees. This is similar to findings of Umberd & Rouse (2016) that identify stages within the mentoring process in which relationships are initiated based on a mentee identifying a mentor based on future career progression. Formal mentorship is an intentional and conscious decision by organizations to assist with building international relationships, longevity, satisfaction, and organizational socialization (Umberd & Rouse, 2016; Young, 2000). Mentors help mentees understand the informal rules and culture of the industry and the organization and can work with mentees in developing confidence needed for advancement and values (Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016).

Characteristics of the Mentoring Relationship

Consistent across the forms of mentorship are the characteristics of reciprocity and mutuality, developmental relationships, communication exchange, and the development of or access to networks (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016; Rose & Kram, 2007; Umberd & Rouse, 2016; Young, 2000). Developmental networks are grounded in social network perspectives that provide an important framework for understanding the dimensions of developmental networks, such as the range of sources from which individuals receive developmental help and the emotional closeness and frequency of communication in these relationships (Rose & Kram, 2007). Research has identified that social networks provide individuals with advice, support, referrals, and general job-related information (Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016). Developmental relationships benefit those who provide and receive mentoring and developmental support, thus creating reciprocity and mutuality in which individuals give and receive in ways that both parties perceive as equally beneficial (Rose & Kram, 2007).

These relationships are based on personal identification and connection. Ashforth, Schinoff, and Rogers (2016) define personal identification as perceived oneness with another individual, where one defines oneself in terms of the other and within the developmental relationship each individual influences each other. Furthermore, personal identification becomes even more critical in informal mentoring as the mentee seeks to identify with a mentor that has achieved a position of power, status congruent to the mentees career projections, and shared values (Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016; Umberd & Rouse, 2016). Furthermore, a mentoring relationship is a work relationship characterized by high levels of trust, responsiveness, self-disclosure, and loyalty (Ashforth, Schinoff & Rogers, 2016). The greater the relational connection, the greater potential for enhanced performance (Amah, 2017). However, several administrative questions also remain under-researched, for example - should mentoring be a mandatory or voluntary program? Should a mentee pick their own mentor or should the company assign them? ... and so on. (Betts & Pepe, 2006). Overall, both mentor and mentee must be willing to engage in the relationship and exchange as part of the relationship (Young, 2000). Relational energy is directly related to longevity of the mentoring relationship.

Differences in Mentoring Based on Gender

Women may struggle more than men to access an influential mentor informally due to persistent gender power relations in organizations (Dashper, 2018). As such, formal mentoring programs are important for women in providing access to influential mentors and due to fewer women in senior positions (Dashper, 2018). Several women mentioned a conscious and unconscious aspect to the mentoring relationship, noting that in some cases the relationship is not named or referred to as mentoring (Helms, et al. ,2016). Women

are in high demand as mentors, but women who mentor downward too much may impede their own career advancement (Helms, et al., 2016; Lublin, 2013). A study by Ragins and Cotton (1999) found gender differences in the perception of efficacy of mentor mentee relationships. In comparing male mentees to female mentees response in regard to formal vs informal mentorship programs, male mentees with formal mentors reported more counseling than female mentees with formal mentors (Ragins & Cotton, 1999) Male mentees with formal mentors in the study also reported more of this counseling function than both male and female mentees with informal mentors (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Conversely female mentees with formal mentors reported an adverse effect of formal mentorship where they reported reduced coaching, role modeling, social counseling, and friendship functions (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Male mentees with female mentors reported less satisfaction with the mentor relationship and that the mentor provided less acceptance in their professional development than any other combination of genders in the mentor mentee relationship (Ragins & Cotton 1999).

Women and Mentoring

In mentoring relationships women most often cited confidence (or lack of) as their development need as compared to men and accordingly mentor engagement included developmental activities focused on building confidence in business settings (Dashper, 2018). Mentoring focused on exposure and visibility within the industry and directly helped women to feel supported and empowered in their own careers (Dashper, 2018). One study looked at the top issues facing female leaders in the workplace, with women reporting challenges to their advancement, including "work life balance," "organizational commitment," "inadequate support systems/mentors,""systematic barriers to advancement," and "lack of female role models." (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018, p.28). Previous studies have found female leaders to be more transformational in the mentoring and development of colleagues (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003), thus, it stands to reason that an absence of such mentorship would create an issue facing women seeking to attain leadership positions. Women also place emphasis on their efforts to mentor other women as they move up within their organizations, thus, addressing the noted issue of "insufficient support systems/mentors" (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018, p.33). There should also be measures taken to address women's concerns in the workplace regarding upward mobility. This includes what training, educational programs, and mentoring opportunities are currently available, and are they made available equally across genders. Despite the importance of networks for individual success, remarkably little is known about what organizational practices, if any, help employees build interpersonal connections and how these effects might vary by type of employee. (Srivastava, 2015).

Overall, in order for mentoring programs to be of value it is suggested that it be a "planned and thoughtful program directed by a committee of the organization's most senior management, which accomplishes the long-term goal" (Clevenger & Singh, 2013, p. 396). Organizations should have guidelines for designing and implementing mentoring programs (Betts & Pepe, 2006). The idea would be to identify high-potential female candidates to mentor, with a goal of having them advance within the workplace, while maintaining a reciprocal relationship for both the mentor and mentee (Clevenger & Singh, 2013; Healy & Welchert, 1990). Beyond the support of a mentoring relationship, research indicates there are differences in the perceived value of mentoring between those who have mentors and those who do not, those involved in mandatory and voluntary mentoring programs and gender-based differences (Betts & Pepe, 2006). Additionally, Betts & Pepe (2006), show five distinct outcomes associated with the mentor/mentee relationships: success, awareness, advancement, attitudes and behaviors.

METHOD

This study was a qualitative research design. Qualitative research was appropriate to the goals of the study as it allowed the researchers to focus on the specific topic taking into account the context, richness of data to reveal meaning and complexity, and connecting that meaning to larger world phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Franke & Devers, 2000; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Pillow, 2003). Qualitative interviews provide researchers the ability to explore in detail the experiences,

motives, and perspective of others allowing the researcher to see the world outside their own self-view (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin and Rubin describe interviewing as structured, conversations and suggest a responsive interview method to extract depth in participant experiences. Interviews as described by Seidman (2006) are, "meaning-making" to understand the lived experiences of others and their meaning of that experience. Accordingly, interviewing requires, "intense listening, a respect for and curiosity about people's experiences and perspectives and the ability to ask about what is not yet understood" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 6).

Participants were identified and selected using a criterion, convenience sampling method that included has been a mentor, has been a mentee, or espouses to be a mentor. In addition, each participant must have had a minimum of five years' experience in management. Lastly, this study evolved into a snowball, intensity-oriented sample (Patton, 1990). The total number of participants was emergent, consistent with qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2014). The techniques described above were used and guided by a semi-structured interview protocol that included main questions that addressed the overall research focus of the study as well as consistency in data collected by the researchers. Probing questions were used to manage the interview and elicit detail. The tree-and-branch structure, in which Rubin and Rubin (2012) liken the interview to a tree with the trunk as the research focus and the branches as the main questions, will be used to obtain depth, detail, vividness, richness, and nuance in the form of follow up questions. Examples of questions included, "Describe your experience with mentorship, as a mentee and a mentor", How did gender of your mentor play a role in your mentoring relationship", describe how your organizational culture supported men and women". Each researcher used the interview protocol to maintain consistency in the interview process. A total of 12 interviews were completed. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were the dominate strategy for data collection designed to gather descriptive data in the subject's own words. At the conclusion of the interviews, the data was transcribed, and qualitative coding was used to find themes and patterns for analysis. The interview data was organized into a codebook to extract themes.

FINDINGS

Although there are numerous definitions that attempt to capture the complexity of mentorship, women in this study consistently identified the following characteristics of their experience with mentoring: advocacy, long-term commitment, and fostering personal and professional growth. With the narratives of women that participated in the study, three main themes emerged that foster positive mentoring relationships that were linked to positive outcomes including career progression, upward mobility, and overall satisfaction. The three themes, the relationship structure, the relational connection, and the perceived value of the relationship to support personal achievement, are each discussed in depth below.

Relationship Structure

There was a lack of consistency in the mentoring structure experienced by women. There was a variety of formal, informal and hybrid structures. Yet, women in the study tended to associate greater success in informal mentoring relationships. For some women, they noted that throughout their careers most experiences with mentorship were in fact organic and there were no formal programs or structures in place from an organizational engagement perspective. Women reported in informal mentoring relationships that their mentors chose to invest in them and therefore they have a duty to reciprocate and invest in others. This philosophy has positive consequences as it encourages mentoring opportunities women to mentor women. For women who experienced formal programs, it was reported a lack of relational connection. Often individuals, women and men, were assigned to leaders within the organization in which the mentee lacked "synergy" or a "real connection" to the mentor. Even in formal programs, there was a lack of strategy or planned activities to support the long-term success of the relationship.

Personal Connection

The next major theme was connection. In this case, connection similarly resembles relational connections between mentor and mentee. This ranged from skills, work ethic, personal drive and ambition, leadership style, personality, and event gender. Regarding gender, women commented same gender mentor/mentee is more comfortable and a gender difference as a potential barrier due to lack of understanding or experiences with common organizational manifestations relative to the gender divide such as harassment and gender bias. Women also identified that they can be their authentic self with other women as compared to men. Within male relationships, there is a level of expectation to demonstrate the same leadership characteristic whether they are natural or exhibited to survive in the organizational culture. Women highlighted the value of their personal connection to their mentor. The deeper personal connection, the deeper and long-lasting relationship. The depth of the connection and relationship were attributed to enhancements in performance achievements. In some cases, women were able to identify their own gaps and developmental needs. As a result, they specifically targeted mentors that demonstrated high proficiency in these areas. For example, one participant commented, "I wanted to develop myself and so I knew there were some areas that I struggled with. So, I sought out people with financial acumen… He really enjoyed food so I would always make sure and pick out different foods of the world, so it was good for him. I felt like I needed to give back to him as well, but he gave me so much insight into the financial acumen in business. It was just a really good relationship." In this example, we also see this participant acknowledge the give and take of the relationship in which there are positive experiences for both the mentor and mentee.

Perceived Value in the Organization

With the structure of the mentoring relationship, there were examples provided in which there was concern over the perceived value of the mentor. For example, the rank, power, and influence of the mentor and their ability to provide access and exposure that supports the mentees future career projections. One participant commented about the power of her mentor stating, "It helped because he was a man in power, if he supported my skill set, I could get the next job..." The perceived value of the mentor is based on the organization's culture and what the organization values. Therefore, the value of the mentor may be inconsistent across organizations and within departments and does not necessarily follow the mentor through his or her changes in the organization.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of mentoring include the connection to work life balance, navigation of organizational structures, career advancement and development of job fulfillment and satisfaction. Mentoring is different for men and women. Yet, there is connection between women and career advancement, upward mobility, and access to social networks. This research was to understand how mentoring manifests for women and identify the most important components of it. This research specifically tried to identify the most critical considerations for women breaking down its complexities and provide insight into organizations on the necessary conditions to support women and mentoring as well as recommendations for organizations to improve mentorship success going forward.

The findings that deeper connection between the mentor and mentee led to more successful career outcomes concurs with the literature on the impact of the quality of mentor and mentee relationships being an important factor in satisfaction (St. Jean and Audet, 2004) and desirable organizational and individual outcomes (Amah, 2017). Although there was some inconsistency in the women's experiences with informal and formalized mentorship programs, stronger connections between the mentor and mentee were reported when the relationship was formed organically through informal programs. This aligns with the notion that informal mentorships result from relational connections such as common interests, goals, leadership style, and accomplishments (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016; Young, 2020). Several women in the study cited feeling a lack of connection with formally assigned mentors supporting the literature on women identifying reduced friendship functions in formal networks (Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and mismatch of mentor/mentee (Eby and Lockwood, 2005).

Women in this study associated more successful outcomes with informal programs contradicting the finding of more positive outcomes from formalized programs (Srivastava, 2015, Sayan et.al., 2019). Formalized mentorship programs were associated with a higher perceived value of the mentoring relationships where more powerful mentors provided better access to opportunities supporting the literature on the importance of influential mentors (Dashper, 2018; Noe 1988; Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016; Umberd & Rouse, 2016). Women in the study reported the importance of reciprocity in the mentoring relationship which was consistent with the concept of mentoring as defined by (Ashforth, et al., 2016; Rose & Kram, 2007; Umberd & Rouse, 2016; Young, 2000). Women reported feeling a duty to mentor others since they had been successfully mentored and they discussed the importance of providing value back to the mentor to make it a positive experience for both parties.

The research findings of this study provide importance insights to organizations when developing mentorship programs and their focus on determining the structure of mentoring, the connection and perceived value. Informal structure was found to be superior in achieving a strong connection between the mentor and mentee. Regardless of the structure whether formal or informal it is important to provide an opportunity for women to achieve a strong connection to their mentor. So, if mentors will be assigned rather than organically formed, care should be taken to match the mentor and mentee based on common interests, career goals, and perceived value. For women to have access to the highest level of the organization it is important for them to be paired with influential mentors. In formalized mentoring programs organizations should consider using a diagnostic instrument to effectively pair mentors and mentees. Some examples of popular tests are the Myers Briggs Type Indicator which classifies people into 16 different personality types, or the DISC profile which measures dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness. In addition, organizations should survey mentees to gain an understanding of their goals in a mentor/mentee relationship then try to pair them with a mentor whose personality and behavior patterns match the identified goals. Poorly paired mentor/mentee relationships can be awkward to separate later or fail, so a successful match the first time is of great importance.

Although the research results may lack generalizability, the study provides evidence that supports more investigation of women's experiences with mentoring. Future studies utilizing longitudinal designs to understand the perceived value of the mentor mentee relationship over time will help to understand specific organizational structures and environments that contribute or prohibit positive mentoring relationships. In this study, data was collected from only one member of the mentoring relationship, future research should be conducted that examines data from both perspectives within the relationship.

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