

LEADERSHIP AND MENTORING: CEO PERSPECTIVES

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Manda H. Rosser, Visiting Assistant Professor
Texas A&M University
mrosser@tamu.edu

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Chief Executive Officers (CEO), leaders of organizations, provide a unique perspective on mentoring relationships and their experiences as both protégé and mentor. Few studies have explored mentoring as an educational tool for developing leaders/CEOs. This exploratory study provides insight into the perceptions of CEOs and their experiences with mentoring relationships.

Manda H. Rosser is a visiting assistant professor in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Director of the Public Policy Internship Program at Texas A&M University. Manda's experience includes the development of mentors and formal mentoring programs, career development for interns, and leadership education for college student and youth development. Her areas of research include leadership, mentoring, and the study of executives and organizational leadership. Manda received a Ph.D. in HRD from Texas A&M University

Introduction

Mentoring is recognized as a key developmental resource for individuals in organizations (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). In particular, mentoring has been described as, “the most intense and powerful one-on-one developmental relationship, entailing the most influence, identification, and emotional involvement” (Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003, p. 40) between a more experienced professional and a less experienced individual. The majority of research has explored mentoring from the vantage point of protégé perceptions, reactions, experiences, and development (Wanberg et al. 2003; Kram, 1988). Mentoring study participants have commonly been employees, college students, or mid-level managers. Little is known regarding the impact of experiences with mentoring for top executives who are, over the span of their careers, likely to participate in developmental relationships as both mentor and protégé. In fact, accessing study participants who are active CEOs has been extremely problematic for a majority of interested researchers (Thomas, 1995). According to Useem (1995), a major challenge to researching CEOs is gaining access.

Mentoring is one of the oldest forms of human development (Shea, 1994). Mentoring dates back to the Stone Age. Talented healers and shamans instructed younger people in the arts and knowledge needed to perpetuate their skills (Shea, 1994). A similar relationship can be seen during the middle Ages with craft guilds where young boys were traditionally apprentices to master craftsmen (Murray, 2001). Both historical contexts overlap with the current understanding of a mentoring relationship which involves a more knowledgeable senior person supporting the development of a less experienced individual. There is a strong connection between mentoring and leadership education as

both are about developing people.

When developing individuals, the organization is being developed as well. From the beginning, organization development scholars and practitioners recognize the importance that leadership education, organization learning, and performance improvement efforts be supported by top management (Egan, 2002). Understanding how positional leaders at the top of organizations experience and conceptualize work related development may be helpful in finding ways to connect the importance of leadership education to those CEOs who have not made connections between key elements of their own learning and development and career success for those whom they manage. Further, understanding CEO experiences as protégés and mentors is important to the relatively unexplored area of how CEOs develop. Bragg (1989) identified that more than one-third of large U.S. companies use formal mentoring for professional development. Such companies have reported a variety of benefits from formal mentoring programs, including: retention, promotion and advancement, satisfaction, morale, and productivity and performance (Hegstad & Wentling, 2004).

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to provide results from exploratory research regarding CEOs' experiences with mentoring. Specifically, the discussion includes how the experiences of the CEOs as protégés inform how they mentor others. Further, CEOs' perceptions regarding the importance of mentoring will provide insight into how one aspect of leadership education is perceived by top executives.

Review of the Literature

Both individuals and organizations use mentoring relationships to enhance learning,

professional, and personal development in the workplace (Wanberg, et al., 2003). There are two types of mentoring, formal programs and informal relationships. Formal mentoring occurs in a structured environment where a third party pairs the mentor and protégé together. Most formal relationships are structured with certain requirements and timeframe (Rosser & Egan, 2003). Informal mentoring develops spontaneously and voluntarily. Most informal relationships are unstructured, flexible, and are usually intimate because the mentor and protégé mutual identify and volunteer to be in the relationship. This study explores informal mentoring experiences; however, there is research being conducted to better understand the implications of informal mentoring relationships for formal mentoring programs (Egan, 2005). This is important for leadership educators because practitioners may be facilitators of formal mentoring programs aimed toward learning and performance improvement.

Kathy Kram, a professor at Boston University and research fellow for the Center for Creative Leadership, is the most cited author in mentoring literature (Wanberg, et al., 2003) and her work is foundational to much of the research that has been conducted. Kram (1988) identified two primary functions of mentoring, psychosocial and career development. Two broad categories of mentoring functions identified by Kram (1988) are what distinguish mentoring from other non-developmental work relationships (Mullen, 1998). Both types of mentoring functions are the essential characteristics that, combined, may differentiate mentoring relationships from other developmental relationships and establish general parameters for the type of development individuals receive from their mentor.

The career development function involves behaviors such as coaching,

sponsorship, providing challenging assignments, protecting protégés from adverse forces, and fostering positive visibility (Ragins, 1997). The career development function is directly related to the knowledge and position of the mentor. The roles within the career development function serve to aid in advancing in an organization (Kram, 1988). Protégés and mentors alike may gain from the career development function and the roles within the function.

The psychosocial function is the aspect of development that enhances protégés sense of competence, helps them to develop a sense of identity, and promotes their effectiveness in a professional role (Kram, 1988). From the perspective of mentor-protégé exchange, these functions commonly involve behaviors such as role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. The psychosocial function typically provides the protégés a higher level of self-worth.

A theoretical foundation providing explanatory support for mentoring in the context of workplace development is social network theory. Higgins and Kram (2001) identified one aspect of social network theory as the developmental network perspective. The definition of an individuals' developmental network is "the set of people a protégé names as taking an active interest in an action to advance the protégés' career by providing developmental assistance" (p. 268).

Method

This article will report key findings from a portion of a qualitative study involving fifteen CEOs of large for-profit US corporations who detailed their experiences as both mentors and protégés. Each CEO had been involved in one or more informal mentoring relationship. Many of the findings will provide preliminary information for

considerations in future research.

The following were criteria for participation in the study:

- All participants had to be chief decision-making officers in their organization.
- The participants had to be willing to engage in a face-to-face interview for at least an hour.
- The participants had to be willing to share their experiences.

The participants had to oversee large organizations.

Limitations to the Method

The population interviewed does provide a cross section of industries in a variety of locations; however, it was difficult to achieve a mixture of race, gender, and age. All participants were Caucasian and male. This is representative of the majority of CEOs today. As seventy one percent of all CEOs in the United States are Caucasian males (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003) and only seven female CEOs in the Fortune 500. In addition, it is necessary to identify that the CEOs in this study were all more than fifty years old and, because of the relative youth of formal mentoring programs, had no opportunity to develop relationships with formal mentors as part of their professional development.

Data Analysis

The fundamental steps of the analysis included:

1. Upon completing the fifteen interviews, interview tapes were transcribed. The transcriptions were reviewed in order to acquire a feeling for them, a “making sense out of them” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). Field notes were incorporated into the protocol to help establish an overall understanding of the CEO’s experience as it

- was shared.
2. All protocols had significant statements extracted and recorded in a table, and repetitive or irrelevant statements were eliminated. There were two groups of significant statements per protocol, those describing the CEOs' experiences as a protégé and those describing the CEOs' experiences as a mentor
 3. In order to complete member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), all CEOs were sent a copy of the significant statements from our discussion and were asked to review and confirm the accuracy of what they intended to say. Seven of the CEOs responded, all seven said they agreed, and a few expanded on some of their comments providing more information.
 4. Formulated meanings were constructed for all interviews and their significant statements. A formulated meaning is a simple statement or phrase developed by the researcher that reflects the essential meaning of the significant statement identified earlier in the process (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994).
 5. The formulated meanings for all CEOs were examined, and similar or closely related statements were clustered together to form themes.
 6. In order to validate the themes, the original protocols were reviewed to insure the themes accounted for all the information in the transcriptions.
 7. Three follow-up interviews were conducted over the phone with key informants. The second interview helped to expand and clarify on the themes that had emerged.

Findings

At the beginning of the study, I expected to get rich description of the experiences of the

CEOs as protégés and the CEOs as mentors. Although they discussed their mentors in detail, the CEOs did not feel comfortable identifying themselves as “mentors.” One CEO in particular described,

This whole thing of developing, mentoring people, is one of the most important factors. It has been hard, and maybe it's one of my own biggest failings over the years is not developing enough people – someone else will have to judge that one day. If I write my own report card I'd give myself the lowest grade on the card in the area of development and succession of people

Further, each of the CEOs initially distanced themselves from the notion that they had been mentors at all. Although, the CEOs do not consider themselves as mentors, they easily discuss mentoring and the importance of mentoring in the development of young professionals. Typically, the CEOs did not describe themselves as mentors. The mentoring behaviors described by the CEOs when interacting with young professionals; however, demonstrated Kram's (1988) mentoring functions. Although, the CEOs did not use the vocabulary of mentoring functions (i.e. exposure and visibility and counsel), their stories perfectly illustrated many of the functions. Mentoring related behaviors are the actions through which Kram's functions are seen. The CEOs talked about what they “hoped” to have accomplished and what they “should” have done. The CEOs did not realize their behaviors were demonstrating the functions of a mentor. Although these men deny being mentors, their behaviors provide evidence to the contrary. One CEO shared, “You should always want to develop other people. They are watching you when you are in this position, and you need to be helping them along.” As the CEO realized he is being watched, the behavior of role modeling begins to occur.

CEOs' Perspectives on Mentoring Relationships

CEOs could describe the type of person they looked for to help “become better.” The

CEOs are intentional about who they want to develop and work with the individuals to help them be successful. One CEO shared, “You know you aren’t going to be CEO forever, and you need to make sure there are strong people to take up the reins.”

Each CEO thought mentoring was important. One CEO said, “Mentoring is perhaps even one of the most important things that can occur in developing others. Mentoring is giving, giving of yourself. There is no expectation of return.” The CEO said, “In mentoring, there is a love of the process of mentoring, and a love of the person. So, you have to love seeing people grow and develop, and also have love for that person. Some people can mentor, and some people cannot.”

One perspective from a CEO concerned how mentoring can be dangerous if not handled correctly.

Mentoring needs to be casual and the more you can have it not be obvious to the rest of the organization the better. I think one of the things that is dangerous about protégé/mentor relationships is when the protégé is hammered by his or her peers because they are jealous. People are dumb; they will look at something and say well that guy’s doing it for the wrong reasons, whether it’s a senior person or the protégé, so it’s got to be done carefully, methodical.

This CEO, felt that even though some relationships are not positive mentoring is important in their organization. Leadership educators need to recognize the role mentoring can play in developing others and the impact it has had on getting people to CEO positions. Each CEO in the study mentioned they would have never been in the position of CEO had it not been for the people who helped them get there. Eleven of the fifteen CEOs came from low socio-economic backgrounds and new the value of working hard. With the attention their mentors provided, each of the eleven were able to break the barriers that could have stopped them from becoming a CEO.

Mentors Inform CEOs experiences with Mentoring

The CEOs each provided an in-depth and vivid description of their experiences as protégés. Clear examples of how more experienced individuals had impacted their development, both personal and professional, were evident as the CEOs discussed their experiences as protégés. The fifteen CEOs, all described mentoring as a key aspect of their development. Although some relationships described were more than 40 years old, the CEOs instantly and easily identified individuals who influenced their success.

Each mentoring relationship described by the CEOs began informally. The CEOs, as young professionals, were not necessarily seeking mentors. After brief interactions with more advanced professionals, something “clicked” and the opportunity for development occurred. Both parties (the CEOs as protégés and their mentors) unconsciously created a mentoring relationship. Each relationship led to positive outcomes for the CEOs as protégés. Further, some mentoring relationships lasted more than thirty years and some over a short period of months. Some relationships were very positive and others were negative and hurtful; however, each relationship taught valuable lessons.

Most of the experiences of CEOs as protégés occurred before the men were executives. The CEOs attribute their success to the mentors who helped the CEOs learn and develop over time. The development occurred one-on-one, sometime in person, and many times over the phone with long conversations. Many lessons the CEOs learned from their mentors are life-long lessons and may be still in use today.

The CEOs often discussed how they learned something from their mentors or how the mentors had, through their actions, demonstrated what not to do when mentoring

others. As development occurs, the protégés also learn how to mentor. One CEO described, “I tend to think mentoring should be very ad hoc not consciously programmed or proactive. I tend to think that the people who mentored me were not that way either.” Another CEO said, “I know the experience I had with my mentor is something I am trying to replicate with other people.”

A more specific example was given:

My boss/mentor, gave me this problem one time, we had this huge project and he asked me to work on the complete mathematical analysis of it, so I worked hard to beat the problem and I got some elegant analysis and I brought it up to him and he says ‘hey this looks great but let’s make a few tests, because your analysis covers all conditions, let’s see if it makes sense,’ well it didn’t. I was so embarrassed, I went back, I have one algebraic mistake, and from that point on, everything else was wrong, I correct it, go through these little checks, everything’s right so I took it back and he says, let that be a lesson to you. And you know it was and now I always had all the engineers that work for me make these in-point analysis, there’s always a simple case that you plug it in, that way you can know the answer...so that was a big mentoring.

One final example of how one CEO’s mentor taught him what not to do, “I do mentor others.” He said, ‘What is my cause?’ I was hurt by my mentor and was screwed, being taken advantage of. I wanted to be different. I wanted to be a giver. I wanted to be fair in all situations. That is how I mentor.” Contrary to Ragins, Cotton, and Miller’s (2000) finding that indicated it is better to not have a mentor than be involved in a negative mentoring relationship, this CEO felt better prepared to be a mentor because of the negative experience with his mentor. The CEOs are conscious of how mentoring should be done.

Although the CEOs did not identify themselves as mentors, each CEO described their actions and how they “hoped to make a difference in others.” The actions described often related back to their own experiences as protégés. Practitioners need to better

understand how to utilize mentoring relationships in developing professionals, especially aspiring executives. In addition, Scholars need to focus research on how mentoring relationships work and how practitioners can use mentoring to develop individuals and improve organizations.

Conclusion

Leadership educators must realize the importance of understanding CEOs' perspectives on the development of others. This article provides a glimpse into what can be gained from the elite population of CEOs regarding their perspectives on developing others through the use of mentoring relationships. In addition, the article illustrates the transfer of lessons learned as protégé to experiences as a mentor and CEO.

CEOs have mentors who have been influential in their development. Most corporate presidents have had mentors who were vital to their success (Jennings, 1971). For these fifteen CEOs, this is true. These CEOs recognize they would not be where they are today without the influence of those that mentored them. Leadership educators must recognize the importance to do more research in order to better understand these relationships and further inform the practitioners.

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