Reciprocal Learning of a Mentor is a Key Factor for an Effective Mentoring Relationship

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Abstract

Mentoring programmes are organized developmental systems within organizations, where a more seasoned person called a mentor, guides a less experienced or newly appointed employee, the mentee, in expanding their knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards the accomplishment of organizational goals. As conventional mentoring stresses the one-way transmission of knowledge from mentor to mentee, new thoughts highlight the necessity of mutual learning in enhancing the effectiveness of mentoring. This article examines the function of mentor motivation, specifically the mentor's willingness to learn through engagement with the mentee, as a critical element of effective mentoring relationships. Using a qualitative methodology, the research investigates the process of both way learning and its impact on the developmental path of the mentor. Research identifies reciprocal learning as enhancing not only the quality of participation but also improving reflective practices and skills of the mentor, thus making it an essential ingredient for crafting quality mentoring schemes.

Keywords: Mentoring, Reciprocal Learning, Effective mentoring, mentor-mentee relationship

Introduction

Individuals in any organization are increasingly confronted with rising challenges associated with emerging technologies, evolving systems, and dynamic programs, all aimed at meeting organizational objectives. These challenges necessitate continuous transformations in knowledge, operational capacity, technical competencies, and behavioural adaptability. To remain relevant and effective, individuals must frequently revise their skillsets, often abandoning outdated knowledge and methods to adopt new frameworks of working (Senge, 1990; Drucker, 1999). In both public and private organizations, newly recruited employees require structured training not only for personal growth but also to contribute meaningfully to organizational success (Kram, 1985; Allen et al., 2004).

To respond positively and effectively to rapid and constant changes, individuals must be given opportunities for growth through training and education (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). It is important to distinguish between training, which typically focuses on specific skills and competencies, and *development*, which encompasses a broader and ongoing process of discovering personal and collective potential (Day, 2001). Mentoring stands out as a critical developmental tool, enabling holistic growth for potential employees or mentees and contributing to both individual career progression and organizational effectiveness (Eby et al., 2013).

A well-structured mentoring scheme serves as an effective strategy for formalizing training programs aligned with organizational objectives. However, the success of such mentoring initiatives does not solely depend on formal structures or predefined goals. It crucially hinges on the proactive involvement and motivational engagement of mentors (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005). Effective mentors act as facilitators, role models, and motivators, creating an enabling environment conducive to both professional and personal development of mentees (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the significance of mentors, limited research has explored the specific behavioural dimensions that underpin mentor motivation and their impact on fostering successful mentoring relationships (Allen & Eby, 2007). This study addresses this gap by examining how *reciprocal learning*—the process wherein mentors also learn and evolve through mentoring interactions—serves as a key motivational driver and contributes significantly to the effectiveness of mentoring programs (Swap et al., 2001; Mezirow, 1997).

Through an extensive literature review and a qualitative analysis of mentoring practices, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how two-way learning dynamics encourage mentor engagement and thus enhance the effectiveness of mentoring within organizational settings.

Problem Statement
Effective mentoring programs play an important role in any organization for the overall growth of employees, employee retention, and the accomplishment of organisational goals. But the effectiveness of mentoring programs primarily depends upon the motivational factors of mentors, which are directly connected with an effective mentoring programme. Secondly, both the mentee and mentor in a mentoring program derive benefits through two learning methods. However, the question to be answered is whether two-way learning is associated with the motivational dimensions of the mentors. This research purports to examine this dimension through an extensive literature review.

Objectives of the Paper
- To examine the concept of Mentoring and reciprocal learning in the mentoring programme.
- To examine how reciprocal learning motivates the mentors and enhances their commitment to the effective mentoring relationship.
- To identify the role of reciprocal learning in an effective mentoring relationship.

Methodology
The methodology of this paper relies on a systematic literature review that aims to clarify the motivational processes of mentors, like the mentor-mentee relationship, and focuses on the importance of bidirectional learning. The methodology is based on collecting, analysing, and combining existing scholarly articles, theoretical frameworks related to the area of mentoring, 'reciprocal mentoring' models (two-way learning), and effective mentoring.

This methodological framework is suitable for the retrieval of insights from the available body of literature, building a conceptual framework, and outlining the relationship between the motivational determinants of mentors in the context of mentor-mentee relationships and reciprocal learning.

For the purpose of a comprehensive analysis, the literature review was conducted through the consolidation of research articles, research reports, online resources, and information on governmental websites. The databases of Google Scholar, ABDC Index Journal, Taylor & Francis, JSTOR, Research Gate, J-Gate, EBSCO, and Sage Articles were thoroughly examined. In addition, renowned web information and book chapters were also explored to allow the compilation of pertinent information. The main search terms and corresponding combinations used to retrieve relevant literature included "mentor-mentee relationship," "motivation in mentoring," "two-way learning in mentoring," "reciprocal mentoring," "mentor roles," and "effective mentoring approaches."

Strategic use of Boolean operators (AND, OR) was applied to narrow and broaden searches as appropriate. The emphasis was mostly on peer-reviewed papers and publications between the period of 2000 to 2024. But based on these articles, a few articles before 2000 were also researched, which provide valuable insights. A narrative synthesis of the literature was used to interpret the literature review and explore a discussion of the motivational role of mentors and their consequences for

mentoring relationships, reciprocal learning, and the relationship between these factors and mentor motivation. Since this method is based on reviewing published literature, it does not pose immediate ethical issues related to human participants. However, the review adhered to academic honesty principles by citing all sources correctly and crediting original work.
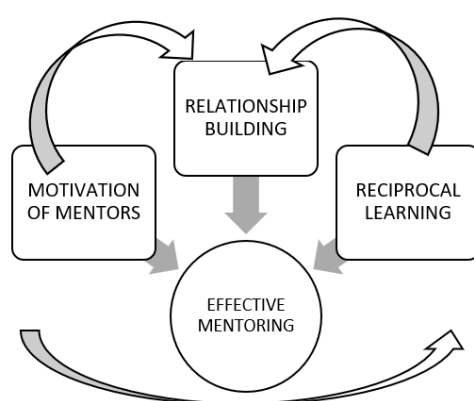
Conceptual Framework

Fig: 1: Theoretical Conceptual Model
Source: **Self**

This theoretical conceptual model for the study explored the two-way learning vis-à-vis the motivational aspects of mentors for effective mentoring relationships. Here, in this model, the independent variable is two-way learning, and the dependent variable is the motivational aspects of mentors, which lead to effective mentoring relationships.

Literature Review

Comparatively, an experienced member of an organisation called a 'mentor' supports the development activities of another junior or less experienced employee, or a newly appointed employee called a 'mentee', through the mentoring process. A mentor helps a mentee undertake development, duly representing the interests of the organisation.

Mentoring

As per Clutterbuck and Megginson (1999), Mentoring is the offline help of one person called a mentee by another person called a mentor for conducting significant changes in the work, thinking, and, Mentoring process in any organisation ensures the personal and professional development of employees for the efficient discharge of their duties duly achieving the organisational goals. In contemporary contexts, mentoring is conceptualized as a systematic process wherein a senior, experienced individual assists another individual in their overall growth, fulfilling the organisational goals through a sequence of structured mentoring processes within a defined time frame.

The mentoring system is applied by experienced employees to share their knowledge and skills in a positive attitudinal way with those who are new to the system or are untrained or unsuitable for the organisation, and there is a gap in their performance. Besides acting as a Sounding Board, the mentor is supposed to work with the mentee and chalk out the mentee's developmental plan for their fulfilment and to make them more useful for the organisation.

It is an undeniable fact that mentoring is an essential tool for achieving organisational success as well as for the career development of not only mentees but also mentors. As per past research studies, under the mentorship of dedicated mentors, mentees can achieve better performance on their job resulting in better satisfaction of job (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby et al., 2013;

Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Zhang, Wang, Galinsky 2022).

The literature review shows that the mentoring system exists in each organisation, but in an informal manner. Senior employees of an organisation share their experience, skills, etc., and mentor the subordinate employees without actually knowing that they are part of the mentoring process. Similarly, the new entrants in any of the government organisations also develop themselves under the mentorship of their seniors. However, a lack of a proper mentoring system, organized tools, and processes may lead to ineffective development of a junior employee (Lonnie D. Inzer, C. B. Crawford). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to significantly augment the understanding of the various elements and variables that exert influence over the informal mentoring process, as well as its resultant outcomes, to effectively elevate the implementation and efficacy of the formal mentoring program (Yongmei Liu, Amine Abi Aad, Jamal Maalouf and Omar Abou Hamdan, 2021). Previous studies have shown that mentors engage in informal mentoring relationships, as they also have some motivation for that. One such motivation is the positive outcome of such an informal relationship. The literature review has brought out the factors that drive a mentor to come under mentoring program which includes cognitive aspects, recognition, incentives, and their behaviour patterns of helping others (Allen et al. 2008; Ghosh and Reio 2013; Hezlett and Gibson 2005) and as such this study is touching upon such issues as a by-product, from the perspective of mentors (Yongmei Liu, Amine Abi Aad, Jamal Maalouf, Omar Abou Hamdan 2021). In different cultures, different motivational factors motivate the mentors to conduct effective mentoring programs (Osula and Irvin 2009; Omanwa and Musyimi 2016). Therefore, a formal mentoring process is essential for the development of an employee in any of organisation.

Mentoring Process

The mentoring process, as outlined by Professor Sheardown (Thames Valley University, UK, 2004), comprises four interlinked phases that foster structured professional development. It begins with the first phase of Relationship Building, where rapport between a mentor and a mentee is established, goals and expectations are aligned with organisational aims, and a formal 'Mentoring Contract' defines the mentee's developmental objectives. In the second phase, Identifying and Planning Developmental Needs, mentors assess the mentee's competencies and collaboratively design a SMART-aligned Mentoring Development Plan (MDP) to bridge performance gaps. In the third phase, the Organizing Activities, the plan is operationalised through guided experiential learning, where mentors provide resources, support, and feedback on progressively challenging tasks to deepen knowledge and skillsets. Finally, the Evaluation phase assesses the extent to which objectives have been achieved, and based on outcomes, earlier phases may be revisited for continued refinement and growth (Source: https://dopttrg.nic.in/TOT_Packages.html).

Mentoring Relationship

A mentoring relationship is a crucial aspect of professional growth in various fields of each organisation. The mentoring relationship involves a dynamic process where two individuals associate with each other in a two-way, beneficial journey of learning, self-awareness, and skill development. Mentoring goes beyond mere guidance; it fosters trust, commitment, and social support, evolving from transactional to transformational interactions. Research emphasizes the importance of understanding mentoring dynamics from the perspective of the mentee and mentor, highlighting the reciprocity and complexity of these relationships. Mentors play a vital role in transferring knowledge, preparing junior colleagues for increased responsibilities, and contributing to organisational success. Ultimately, effective mentoring relationships contribute significantly to personal and professional development, creating lasting impacts on individuals and organisations alike (Ciarrochia, J., Hayes, S. C., Haye, L., Sahdra, B., Ferrari, M., Yap, K., & Hofmann, S. G. 2021; Deborah, Anne, Ondeck.,

Barbara, Stover, Gingerich 1994; Norma, R., Hagenow., Mary, Anne, Mccrea 1994; Jay, T., Knippen., Thad, B., Green. 1991.)

The roles of a mentor in the mentoring program are multiple and inter alia including identification of the overall development needs of the mentee, providing him advice and guidance for such advancement, continuously helping him with his career and personal development, advising the organisation for the overall development of the mentee, etc. Throughout the mentoring program, the mentor acts as a counsellor, advisor, coach, teacher, friend, communicator, etc (Jacobson and Kaye 1996, Lonnie D. Inzer, C. B. Crawford 2005, Sheardown Brian, 2004).   Some studies have also provided specific tasks for a mentor, such as the promotion of intentional learning of the mentee, sharing their successes and failures as a storyteller to analyse the mentee about the realities of the organisation. Such tasks of the mentor shall also develop a strong rapport between mentee and mentor (Lonnie D. Inzer, C. B. Crawford, 2005. In reality, mentorship constitutes a confluence of continuous occurrences, experiential learnings, observations, scholarly inquiries, and reflective evaluations, and therefore, both the mentor and the mentee together engage where they mutually share accountability for the overall development of the mentee (Lonnie D. Inzer, C. B. Crawford 2005, Sheardown Brian 2004).

As per the study conducted by Lim, Tai, Bamberger, and Morrison in the year 2019, many barriers, problems, and constraints come up as hurdles faced by the mentees while taking help from the mentors under mentoring program (Zhang, Wang, Galinsky, 2022). The mentor-mentee relationship is indispensable for effective mentoring, characterized by mutual motivation and both-ways learning. This dynamic fosters both personal and professional development for both, thereby enhancing the mentoring relationships (Gün, 2018).

The mentoring relationship plays an inescapable role in the development of autonomy among mentees, necessitating that mentors receive appropriate training to facilitate this process effectively (Farrukh & Mehr, 2023). The presence of reciprocal communication and shared experiential learning is essential, as these factors enable mentees to cultivate confidence and acquire knowledge, a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in entrepreneurial contexts (Zvaigzne et al., 2019). Within professional environments, the mentoring relationship frequently manifests as informal and symbiotic, thereby fostering psychological safety and promoting growth for both mentors and mentees (Nunan et al., 2023).

Motivation for Mentors

Past studies reveal that mentors feel more motivated when they are made aware of the tangible impact of formal mentoring programs, including the psychological meaningfulness derived from such engagements. This awareness fosters a genuine intent among mentors to invest their wholehearted efforts in the mentoring relationship. On the other hand, it is equally essential for mentees and the organizers of the mentoring programs to understand and internalize the value of mentoring, ensuring the program design aligns with this understanding (Young & Perrewé, 2000). Research affirms that mentors with high developmental goals tend to engage more deeply in mentoring programs, perceiving them as psychologically rewarding and aligned with both organizational goals and the holistic development of the mentee (Noe, 1988; Turban et al., 2017; Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). Furthermore, contemporary organizational competitiveness benefits significantly from culturally inclusive, gender-aware, and innovation-driven mentors who are adept at fostering meaningful interpersonal connections (Huang & Luthans, 2015; Lin et al., 2021). These insights are foundational for examining the concept of mentoring and reciprocal learning, as well as their contributions to mentor motivation and relationship effectiveness.

Reciprocal Mentoring

"Mentoring is a two-way street. You get out what you put in." – Steve Washington. This statement encapsulates the essence of reciprocal learning in mentoring, the central theme of this research. Studies have demonstrated that mentors not only gain mentoring-specific and relational knowledge but also acquire occupational-specific insights through interactions with mentees (Astrove & Kraimer, 2020). The direction of learning in mentoring is inherently two-way and adaptable to interventions, with knowledge flowing both from higher to lower positional power and vice versa. This bidirectional dynamic is especially valuable for mentors holding significant authority, offering a means to overcome the distancing effects of hierarchical power by encouraging perspective-taking and humility (Galinsky et al., 2006; 2014; Zhang et al., 2022; Chen, 2016). Distinguishing between 'being an expert' and 'transferring expertise' (Hinds, 1999; Patterson & Pfeffer; Zhang & North, 2020), current research supports the notion that mentors' learning from mentees—commonly referred to as reverse mentoring predicts mentee development that extends beyond technical knowledge to more transformative outcomes. This finding emphasises the role of reciprocal learning in effective mentoring relationships and the cultivation of specific learning-oriented dispositions essential for talent development (Zhang et al., 2022).

Mentor Motivation Through Reciprocal Learning

Reciprocal learning redefines the mentor's role, encouraging them to see themselves as co-learners. This perspective shift enhances intrinsic motivation and leads to deeper engagement in the mentoring process. Mentors who view their involvement as an opportunity for personal learning are more likely to adopt a developmental orientation, thereby reinforcing their commitment and motivation (Ginkel et al., 2016). Additionally, the emotional resonance of mentoring relationships rooted in positive affect and mutual engagement enhances mentors' satisfaction and sense of fulfilment as they witness their mentees' growth (Oxford & Bolaños-Sánchez, 2016). Research further highlights that reciprocal learning fosters collaboration across diverse backgrounds (Coff & Lampert, 2019), while in academic contexts, it supports critical reflection and identity formation (Code et al., 2022). By bridging historical power imbalances and enabling gender and cultural equity (Brown et al., 2024), reciprocal learning is shown to be a powerful force for motivating mentors and enhancing the effectiveness of mentoring relationships, thereby fulfilling the core objectives of this study.

Discussion

Effective mentoring feeds on a dynamic and interactive process wherein a two-way flow of ideas enriches mentor as well as mentee. A reciprocal learning process, and not a unidirectional transmission of knowledge, is thus better suited to a mutually enriching setting and an accelerated personal as well as professional growth. Guidance and feedback by the mentor go hand in hand with benefits that accrue from the mentee's new viewpoints, questioning attitude, and current perceptions, especially useful in areas such as technology. This mutual growth causes the mentor's own goals to meet developmental program goals, further enhancing motivation and obligation. When mentors learn and develop in conjunction with their mentees, the mentoring process becomes a strong force for reciprocal development. Nevertheless, though reciprocal learning is a central weapon for encouraging mentors, it must be managed very carefully. If it is not properly designed and openly communicated, mentors feel overburdened with expectations for mutuality, which may dampen participation. Thus, the successful implementation of reciprocal learning is contingent on guided support and alignment with mentor and mentee objectives.

Conclusion

A motivated and engaged rapport between mentor and mentee is fundamental to an effective mentoring relationship. This paper concludes that reciprocal learning is a pivotal factor in enhancing

mentor motivation, strengthening commitment, and fostering a truly effective mentoring process. When both participants actively contribute to the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and insights, the relationship evolves into a collaborative partnership. Therefore, aligning with the objectives of this research, it is recommended that reciprocal learning be recognized and embedded as a central principle in mentoring programs to unlock their full potential and achieve sustainable developmental outcomes for both mentors and mentees.

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