“The effect of mentoring on the success of mentees: challenges and imperatives”

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SECTION 2. Management in firms and organizations

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The effect of mentoring on the success of mentees: challenges and imperatives

Abstract

This paper presents an overview of mentoring with specific reference to mentors' experience in the quest to develop mentees in their careers. The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors that are essential for effective mentoring to happen and also reflect on impediments factors. The results show that success of the mentees depends on the effective implementation of mentoring. A qualitative methodological approach was used for the study and data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews among mentors in the selected public hospitals. The results indicate that mentors are willing and able to mentor mentees despite the fact that it is taking much of their time. It emerges further that the results indicate that mentoring is imperative to fulfil the developmental needs of the mentees. Mentors indicate that for mentoring to be successful, it is important for top management to show commitment on mentorship. It can be concluded that what matters most in the process of mentoring is the commitment from top management and the experience of mentors.

Keywords: career, imbalances, intervention, mentoring, mentee.
JEL Classification: M53.

Introduction

In recent years, mentoring has been identified as a worthwhile workplace learning activity in many organizations (Handsford, Ehrich & Tennent, 2003). In the South African context, mentoring became an imperative after 1994 elections. It was important for the government to address the injustices experienced during the apartheid era where discriminatory practices were evident and legislated to give whites first priority for employment opportunities (Rankhumise, 2007). Historically, South Africa had unbalanced and discriminatory practices in employment patterns on the basis of racial discrimination. This type of practice channelled blacks into the unskilled and semi-skilled labor force and this, in essence, created a greater opportunity for white workers to pursue careers in elite posts (Munetsi, 1999). To address all the imbalances experienced in the past, government initiated some interventions that will ensure that all previously disadvantaged people are afforded the chance to advance in the employment practices. To ensure that the designated groups succeed in their respective careers, mentoring has been seen as one of the intervention measure. From the interventions' point of view, mentoring plays an important role in the growth, development and advancement of employees in their new roles.

Hamlin (2011) explains that mentoring has been recognised as a powerful human resource development intervention aimed at providing inexperienced employees with career advancement opportunities and also serves as a form of on-the-job training. Bozeman and Feeney (2009) argue that the value of mentors who contribute to the development of potential talents is important. This has not been evaluated in public sector institutions and hence the researcher felt the need to conduct this study in public hospitals. Other studies have been conducted on mentoring. For instance, Hamlin (2011) asserts that for effective mentoring relations to be established, mentors need to adopt both a pulling and a pushing style. The essence of this study is that a favorable environment for mentoring should be created so that mentors and mentees can feel free to share their expectations and challenges as regards to mentoring process. What this notion means in the current study is that public hospitals environment should enable mentoring to take place without hurdles. In order to create a conducive and enabling environment, top management should be supportive of the intervention.

According to Arifeen (2010), mentors may or may not be employed in the same organization as the mentee and the two options have their own implications. On the one hand, if they are in same organization, the mentor may be physically available, may be in a good position to provide direct mentoring and this in essence could enable the mentor to give more assignments to the mentee. Finally, if mentor is employed elsewhere, it may happen that the mentor may have inter-organizational resources and may even have long-range involvement in the mentee's career.

1. Literature review

There has been a groundswell of research conducted on mentoring in recent years and findings have been made on the association between the presence of the mentor and the career success of mentees (Singh, Ragins & Tharenou, 2009). Mentoring is said to be a

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relationship between a more senior, experienced person and a less experienced protégé with the intention of helping and developing the mentees' career. Hamlin (2011) points out that mentoring is twofold, namely: it entails career development and psychosocial support. Pertaining to career development, mentoring provides support to mentees through sponsorship, exposure and issuing challenging assignments aimed at helping them to progress well in their respective careers. The major role of mentoring in providing psychosocial support is to provide support services such as counselling, role modelling, personal development and acceptance with the aim of enhancing the mentees' self-efficacy.

In pursuance of mentoring, it is imperative that the role of mentor and mentee are clarified. Mentees should have qualifying characteristics such as competence, take the initiative, intelligence, ambition and desire to learn (Samier, 1999, p. 89). In the mentoring process, mentee is ordinarily regarded as someone who should bring wealth of high achievement of goals, creativity, commitment, self-generation and motivation and thus mentors are not replacement of these qualities. Cunningham and Eberle (1993 cited by Pompa, 2012) identified crucial skills and characteristics which a mentor should possess, namely, willingness to trust, ability to communicate, patient and tolerant, personal security and confidence, introspective and open and accessibility. These factors, as well as expertise, knowledge of the mentee's specific context and availability seem to be important for the success of mentoring relationship to occur. Concomitant to this, there are common challenges that might be experienced during mentoring, namely, professional expertise mismatch, lack of training and lack of time (Pompa, 2012). All these factors can result in challenges of incompatibility and as such the mentoring process in this case may not succeed.

In terms of the context of this article, the focus is on the mentoring process as experienced by mentors in the quest to assist mentees in their career development. For the purpose of this paper, a mentor is defined as a higher-ranking individual with advanced experience and knowledge who plays a positive role in the development of another person's career (Singh, Ragins & Tharenou, 2009). Mentor can further be defined as influential, high placed individuals with a senior level of knowledge and experience, who undertake to provide upward mobility and career support for their mentees. De Beer (1998) and Meyer and Fourie (2004) describe mentoring as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship in a work environment whereby a more advanced and experienced incumbent helps a less experienced person who has developmental potential to develop in some specified capacity. The mentor's role is to give work-related information and act as a role model for the person being mentored. Some of the perceived fears associated with mentoring relationships in South Africa are that the persons being mentored could in future take their mentors' jobs. Wingrove (1993) attests that this could mean that mentors are less willing to assist mentee, since the increasing skills development of black people could have the resulting effect of white people being retrenched and having fewer opportunities.

In terms of section 2 of the Skills Development Act (1998), government departments should ensure that the advancement of inexperienced people is reinforced through training and mentorship measures to provide mentees with an opportunity to acquire new skills. Any barriers, including resistance to change, employment equity, skills development plans and training interventions have to be overcome in accordance with the internal policy of the organizations (Esterhuyse, 2003).

In Europe, mentoring has been shown to contribute positively to retention, succession planning and knowledge management (Clutterbuck, 2003). Locally, it is acknowledged that mentoring interventions can lead to high standards of performance (Meyer & Fourie, 2004). Only through effective mentoring programs can mentees perform in line with set standards and thus be able to claim promotion based on merit (Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999). However, mentoring programs work best if mentees are allowed to select their own mentors based on relationships already established. Therefore, the success of mentoring always involves commitment on the part of three parties, namely the mentor, mentee and the management (Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999). According to Meyer and Mabaso (2001), beyond the commitment of the three parties, the successful implementation of mentoring is wholly dependent on the following factors. Firstly, commitment based on sound principles should be obtained, thereby identifying the reason for the mentoring program; for example, a need to speed up the development of future leaders. Secondly, mentors should be properly identified and screened for their roles, as well as evaluated. Willing and able mentors easily ensure a successful process. Thirdly, the appropriate matching of mentors and trainees would ensure that mentors have relevant experience in the speciality of the persons being mentored.

Against the given background and the challenges associated with mentorship, this specific study intends to, firstly, assess how mentors view mentoring programs and secondly, identify factors that matters for the success of mentoring.

2. Research methodology

A qualitative methodological approach, which was exploratory in nature, was employed in this study. It was envisaged that this approach will unravel the nature of the mentorship programs implemented by public hospitals. The essence of exploratory research in this case was to obtain a richer understanding of the insights associated with the hurdles experienced by the mentors in the pursuance of the intervention which could essentially hinder the mentoring. Taking into account the approaches stipulated above, during the interview mentors were given the opportunity to share their experiences and challenges in terms of factors that could influence mentorship in public hospitals.

2.1. Population and sampling. The study was conducted in three provinces of South Africa, namely, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Gauteng. The population consisted of mentors in the selected hospitals. Purposive sampling was used to select mentors to take part in the research. The latter sampling technique was deemed appropriate because it is normally applied in cases where participants are selected based on their knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation and discretion of the researcher.

2.2. Data collection procedure. In collecting data, the researcher used one central question as a point of departure, namely: *"What experiences and challenges do you encounter which influence mentoring as an intervention to develop mentees?"* Based on this primary question, other questions emerged as the interviews progressed. The researcher then asked probing questions in order to explore particular aspects in greater depth. Interviews were conducted until such time as saturation point was reached and in this instance, saturation was reached at the **15th** participant.

In addition to the field notes, the interviews were audio-taped and data were analyzed using Tesch's data reduction methods (Creswell, 2009). Outcomes of the findings from the qualitative study are reflected verbatim as justification and the originality of the findings.

3. Main findings

The findings of the research are discussed in terms of sample realization which relates to the number of participants as well as their demographic information. This will be followed by the themes that emerged from the analysis.

3.1. Sample realisation. A total of 15 [n=15] mentors participated in the study. The gender distribution among the interviewed mentors was 80% (12) male and 20% (3) female. Notably, most of the respondents (50%) were drawn from Mpumalanga public hospitals and this was a result of proximity shared by the hospitals.

The discussion of this section is based on main themes that emerged during the analysis, *inter alia* **success of mentoring, mentoring period, commitment by management to mentorship, policy on mentoring, the role of mentees, mentee autonomy, improved performance and challenges to mentoring.**

The participants articulated quite interesting experiences that had both positive and negative influences on the success of the mentees in their respective careers. In the next section, the empirical evidence is discussed based on the verbatim responses.

3.1.1. Success of mentoring. As posited by participants, it emerged from the analysis that a number of factors, could lead to failure of mentoring initiatives, namely lack of mentors and mentor expertise. It is imperative that when selecting mentors, consideration be given to the expertise that the mentors possess and to their respective skills. This would enable a good match between mentor and mentee. Lack of expertise could lead to mentors failing to provide focus and guidance to the mentees. This resonates with what Celliers (1995) and Tsukudu (1996) found when they reported that the effectiveness of mentorship depends on knowledge, attitude and competence of mentors. Interviews with mentors revealed the same sentiments, as follows: *"…mentors should have thorough knowledge, skills and experience so that with our experiences we could guide and coach our subordinates properly …"*

The other crucial factor that emerged is lack of mentors. For mentoring to succeed, it is imperative to have a pool of mentors to ensure effective implementation of the intervention. This is evident from what participants said: *"…We do not have enough mentors to assist in mentoring. We have other duties to fulfil and if we have adequate mentors, I think the situation might be better…"*

Lack of mentors could hamper the efforts of fast-tracking mentees in their development. The rationale could be as a result of the fact that most experienced employees concentrate more on strategic issues which is taking much of their time.

3.1.2. Mentoring period. Participants indicated that the period for mentoring mentees was not sufficient. Essentially, mentees are exposed to mentoring for shorter periods which do not allow them to learn all

what they should. *"…I have realized that most of the mentees are given three–five months for mentoring. This in fact does not allow them to learn as much as they should…", "…The time provided for mentees is inadequate; enough time should be allocated to ensure that a wide scope of activities is covered so that they could work independently …".* These findings corroborate with those of Samier (2000), who found that time is a critical aspect of development and for effective mentoring to take place two-five years is a reasonable period. Based on this assertion, it could be argued that mentees should be allowed to stay within the mentoring process for a long time so that they can learn all the aspects of the work and gain confidence.

3.2. Commitment by management to mentorship. Commitment by management plays a pivotal role in every intervention in the institution. The mentors surveyed attested that it is important for management to be committed to mentorship as a program.

Mentors revealed: *"…though I agree; I essentially believe that commitment is twofold, that management and employees must both be committed to the process. Management should provide support and financial means and employees must then be committed to the actual process …"* Samier (2000) also made the same findings and posits that a number of supportive activities have to take place to ensure viability of the program. In this case, it means that senior management should create an enabling organizational climate for mentoring to take place. These findings suggest that if hospital management is not committed to the process, mentoring may not succeed.

3.3. Policy on mentoring. From the research it emerged that policies and guidelines were not in place. For mentoring to be effective, policies and procedures should be developed to allow commitment from both mentor and mentee. Others indicated that those already in existence were not well communicated: *"…There are plans for general training, not specifically for mentoring. Mentoring is taking place, but there are no statistics or evidence to say these are employees who were mentored. One can therefore say that guiding policies in the implementation of mentoring are not communicated to the workforce …"* It can therefore deduce that lack of policies and procedures could result in a situation where the program is not explained to the mentors or mentees. The evaluation process could be unclear and so forth.

3.4. The role of mentees. Although the professionalism of mentors is perceived by ensuring that mentoring is delivered as effectively as possible as a learning experience, the role of the mentee is imminent (Bamford, 2011). Mentors interviewed posited that for successful mentoring to take place, the role of the mentee should be explicit. Importantly, for the mentoring experience to work, both mentor and mentee need to take equal responsibility since the intervention is not individualistic. The mentee in the context of the intervention are encouraged to plan, record and give feedback to their mentors. In this case, mentors would advise accordingly in terms of whether the mentoring experience has developed in terms of leadership skills and self-confidence.

3.4.1. Mentee autonomy. One of the most important factors in mentoring is to allow mentee freedom to think through issues and make their own judgements. *"… You know those people need to be given freedom to initiate issues in their environment and only seek clarification and direction from us…"* By allowing them to work partly independent, this could enhance self-efficacy among mentees. This type of flexibility would assist mentees to prosper in their career development.

3.5. Improved performance. Participants indicated that if mentoring is well planned, it could improve the performance of the mentee. The mentee could learn skills that would assist in carrying out their roles.

"... Surely if mentoring is done well and according to agreed terms and conditions agreed upon with the mentee, a good progress can be made..." " ... This will also improve self confidence of the mentee and may prosper in the job, subsequently get promotion..."

It is evident from the above statement by mentors that there should be mutual understanding in the process of mentorship. This would ensure that desired expectations are achieved. However, this would benefit both parties; for instance, the mentee will benefit in terms of self-efficacy being created while the mentor's track record of mentoring will be highly regarded by management, mentees and prospective mentees.

3.6. Challenges to mentorship. It emerged from the findings that though there are benefits attached to mentoring, some challenges are evident. This is characterized by among others, the amount of time spent on developing another person's career, which can take mentor's time, energy and productivity. The other pitfall is that the mentor may feel a sense of personal failure in the case he/she does not perform according to set goals.

Mentors revealed: *"... Though we accept to be mentors, there are challenges that we normally face, for instance, mentoring is taking most of the time and*

productivity may drop while busy developing another person...” One other thing is when mentee do not meet the envisaged expectations; here mentors feel personal failure we can affect future mentoring...”

From the aforementioned assertion, it can be deduced that though mentors accept the responsibilities of being mentors, they face some challenges which could reflect negatively on their careers going forward with mentorship.

Conclusions

The results of this research offer a new direction of understanding factors that contribute to effective mentoring to occur. It could be concluded that for mentorship to be successful, there should be commitment from top management to the program. The role of mentees should be clear and should be allowed some freedom to initiate issues in their respective environments. Mentors should be trained in the professional expertise in which mentee is located to avoid possible fallout. This is important in the sense that mentors should always be on top of the mentee in terms of direction and knowledge. It further emerged that mentoring period is insufficient to enable mentorship to bear fruitful results.

This study has some limitations in the sense that only mentors were involved in the study and it could have been interesting to get the perspective of mentees as well. The other limitation is that the study was voluntary and those who did not participate could have responded differently.

In conclusion, this study has provided important account of factors that could impede the success of mentorship. It could finally be attested that mentorship is imperative for the enhancement of self confidence of the mentees.

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