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# Mentoring – Improving the quality of work life and organisational effectiveness: A case study of a formal mentoring programme implemented in a higher education organisation



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**Abstract:** *As we enter the new millennium mentoring is receiving considerable attention that is evident in the proliferation of academic and popular literature and research on the subject. This study of a formal mentoring programme implemented in a Higher Education Organisation – UNITEC Institute of Technology - was conducted to determine the experiences of participating staff. In particular the study sought to identify the nature of the work issues discussed and the value perceived by participants as flowing from their involvement in a programmed mentoring relationship. The results reveal that there is nearly an even balance between the psychosocial and career orientation of the workplace issues covered, but what was most highly valued by both mentees and mentors were those aspects of the mentoring relationship which were psychosocial in nature. This study highlights the potential of formal mentoring programmes as a valuable and appropriate professional development strategy in higher education organisations.*

**Keywords:** *Formal mentoring programme, work place issues, psychosocial & career functions*

## Introduction

Mentoring is an old concept - four thousand years old if we accept the origin of the term. The term derives from Greek mythology when Odysseus left his family to fight in the Trojan war and entrusted his friend, Mentor, with the care, guidance and education of his son Telemachus in his absence. Mentoring relationships in this sense, where a more experienced person supports a less experienced person, have long been part of education whether or not they are known by this term or recognised as such. What is new about mentoring is the recognition, status and value attributed to the concept and the benefits that flow from it (Fullerton, 1994).

Defining mentoring is problematic because the nature and number of activities linked to the concept and practices of mentoring seem to be growing every day. While there is no agreed definition, mentoring can be described as an interpersonal relationship. This can take the form of a more senior or experienced person helping a junior or less experienced person (Clutterbuck, 1992) or in a more extended concept where the mentor, of equal or similar standing, goes beyond guidance and sponsorship and works with the mentee to provide support to build self confidence and competencies to improve working relationships. It is this latter concept that seems to sum up the core insights of the most recent analysis of mentoring

and which has been the impetus for much of the current interest (Gibb, 1994). This interest has manifested itself in an increasing number of formal mentoring programmes. Formal mentoring programmes provide a structure and processes to create mentoring relationships, unlike informal mentoring that relies on relationships arising spontaneously and naturally. Formal mentoring programmes also provide a process that is inclusive and is therefore an equitable means of ensuring that all staff have an opportunity to benefit. Establishment of such programmes have been seen as important affirmative action procedures in the USA and UK (Edwards, 1995; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995) and in Australia (Sheridan, 1995) in that they attempt to dismantle the barriers that prevent mentoring being accessible to women and other minority groups. During the last two decades formal mentoring programmes in higher education have been introduced to support new staff and now the focus has extended to developing research (Hylan & Postlethwaite, 1998). A comparatively recent phenomenon in higher education is that of mentoring programmes to improve teaching and learning and leadership/management knowledge and skills of all staff – academic and administrative.

Each organisation must find its own style and it depends on what the intended outcome of the mentoring is to be as to what functions will be present. Functions are those aspects of a mentoring relationship that enhance both an individual's growth and advancement. After analysis of several studies Kram (1988) categorised the functions that emerged from mentoring relationships into two broad categories: career functions and psychosocial functions. "Career functions are those aspects of the relationship that enhance learning the ropes and preparing for advancement in an organisation. Psychosocial functions are aspects of a relationship that enhance a sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness in a professional role" (Kram, 1988,22). Career and psychosocial functions are not necessarily distinct; and where elements of both functions are combined, the potency and benefit of the mentoring relationship is increased.

This paper presents a study of a formal mentoring programme in a higher education organisation - the UNITEC Mentoring Scheme. The research was conducted to determine staff experience of the programme and in particular to discover what workplace issues were covered and what was the perceived value of the relationship to both the mentors and mentees.

### ***The UNITEC Mentoring Scheme***

Mentoring at UNITEC has traditionally occurred on an informal basis so to complement this a pilot formal mentoring scheme was established in 1999 - The UNITEC Mentoring Scheme. This scheme was the initiative of the UNITEC Women's Advisory Committee and Human Resources and linked to the organisation's EEO strategic objectives. The purpose of the scheme was to provide "on-the-job" professional support in which a mentor and mentee together designed and monitored a professional support plan for the mentee (UNITEC Mentoring Scheme Policy, 1999). The focus of the scheme was on the current work needs of the mentee, and the intention was to encourage professional and personal development of UNITEC Staff in research, career development, leadership change management and to expand organisational knowledge.

A co-ordinator supported by a Mentoring Core Group (whose members were drawn from various roles, levels and departments) implemented and monitored the programme. All female staff were invited to apply and participation was voluntary. As training was considered crucial to understanding the specific mentoring framework and its implications it was compulsory for all participants to attend a training session - one day for mentors and a half day for mentees.

Participants filled in a questionnaire indicating broad areas in which they wished to be mentored or in which they were willing to mentor others. Using this questionnaire information the Mentoring Core Group matched the pairs and a total of six pairs comprised of academic and allied staff were established. At the outset, the mentoring relationship was given a limited time span of six months and regular meetings took place (between six and eight) generally face-to-face and in addition by telephone and email. It was the intention of the organisers that this Mentoring Programme should start off small for although it had the backing of senior management ‘instilling a mentoring mindset within an organisation takes time (sometimes years) and perseverance’ (Kuo, 2000,8).

## Method and Analysis

### Participants

At the end of their mentoring relationship the twelve pilot programme participants (six mentors - three academic and three allied staff, and six mentees - four academic and two allied staff) completed a questionnaire.

### Survey Questionnaire

Two written questionnaires were distributed for this survey, one for the mentees and one for the mentors. It was intended the results of the survey would provide systematic descriptive evidence about the participants’ experiences of their mentoring relationships, in particular: *the nature of the work issues covered and the perceived value of the relationship*. Both questionnaires were composite questionnaires involving a preference scale and open responses. The mentor’s questionnaire had a total of fourteen questions and the mentees’ a total of nine questions. These aligned with Gibb’s (1994) evaluation model being directed at the following areas:

	Mentors	Mentees
<b>Factual</b> – What has the mentoring relationship involved?	8 questions	5 questions
<b>Processes</b> – How do the participants describe their experience of mentoring. What is the balance of “psychosocial” outcomes and “career” outcomes?	3 questions	2 questions
<b>Affective</b> – What are participants’ feelings about the mentoring relationship? Has it been worthwhile?	3 questions	2 questions

**Figure 1: Types of questions**

The qualitative data incorporated triangulation of method in that both mentors and mentees were asked the same questions. The reliability of the data was assured by verifying the comparison between mentors and mentee responses to the questions.

### Analysis

The qualitative responses of the participants were analysed using a two-stage analysis to identify firstly, the major themes and sub-themes within the data, and secondly, to categorise these major themes into Kram’s (1988) model of mentoring functions – psychosocial functions and career functions (see Fig. 2). The numbers of responses in the sub themes are recorded. The quantitative data is recorded according to the participant role.

The decision to place responses into these themes and categories was a subjective one by the researcher.

Major Themes	Workplace Issues Covered	Value to Mentee	Value to Mentor
<i>Sub Themes</i>	<i>Relationships/People Management</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>Informed my own reflection</i>
	<i>Strategizing relating to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Personal</i></li> <li>• <i>Work</i></li> </ul> <i>Problem solving</i>	<i>Nurtured and Supported</i>	<i>Practise skills</i>
	<i>Goal Setting</i>	<i>Reflection on own processes</i>	<i>Broadened organisational knowledge</i>
	<i>Coaching and Feedback</i>	<i>Providing Strategies</i>	
	<i>UNITEC Processes</i>	<i>Practising e.g. role play</i>	
		<i>Organisational Knowledge</i>	

Kram's (1988) Function Categories  Psychosocial Functions  
 Career Functions

**Figure 2: Themes and sub themes of data analysis**

### Results and Discussion

The results and discussion include both the mentee and mentor perspectives and relate to the nature of the mentoring relationships – *what workplace issues were covered? and what was the perceived value of the relationship to the mentees and mentors?*

#### ***The workplace issues covered - Mentor and Mentee Perceptions.***

It is interesting the results reveal that overall the mentors identified nearly twice as many issues as their mentees - 63% and 37% respectively. Possibly this is because the mentors were distant from the work contexts and this enabled them to perceive the issues as separate whereas, the mentees were highly involved and the complexity of issues was not obvious to them. Being distant from a situation can be an advantage when sifting and sorting issues, and the mentees highlight this as one of the two greatest values of their mentoring relationships (see Fig. 5).

	Relationship/ People Management	Strategizing			Goal Setting	Coaching & Feedback	UNITEC Processes	No. of Areas Identified	
		Personal pathways	Problem Solving/ Decision Making	Work pathways					as % of total
Mentors	4	4	2	4	1	1	3	19	63%
		10							
Mentees	3	2	1	1	1	1	2	11	37%
		4							
Kram's Function Categories	Psychosocial Functions			Career Functions					100%

**Figure 3: Workplace Issues Covered**

Both the mentees and mentors named strategizing of some type (personal issues, work issues, problem solving and decision making) as the most dominant workplace issues discussed (4 &

10, respectively). The next most identified work issue by both was Relationships/People Management (3 & 4, respectively). *“Primarily we dealt with people problems”; “I realised things didn’t have to be the way they were –allowing others to dump on me”*

Improved organisational communication is often one of the desired outcomes of a formal mentoring programme. Whilst organisational processes were not in the top two sets of identified issues the mentoring relationships did provide an opportunity for Mentees and Mentors to share organisational knowledge and information such as: *“research procedures”, “moderation of assessment”, “UNITEC policy and procedures”; “she had been where I am now and her experience of UNITEC helped a lot”*

The remaining issues of goal setting and coaching appeared as two of the total workplace issues for both mentees and mentors.

In summary, although there were differences in the overall quantity of issues that mentors and mentees identified, what did emerge very clearly was that the proportions of the issues were similar. There was therefore congruency in the issues identified, the difference lying in the magnitude. To give added meaning to the workplace issues results Kram’s (1988) categorisation of the functions of mentoring was employed. That is, the psychosocial function (providing support, advise, encouragement and enhanced feelings of competence) and career function (providing feedback, coaching and development of new skills).

When all the workplace issues were placed in these categories (see Fig.3) it can be seen mentees considered slightly more workplace issues that were psychosocial in nature than career function. Mentors confirmed these proportions at ten and nine respectively. Researchers Caldwell & Carter (1993) and Little & Nelson (1990) suggest that in mentoring programmes the focus is best on work related development and career concerns while others, Levinson et al. (1978) and Kram (1988), support a focus on psychosocial development. The overall weighting of this study’s workplace issues sits closer to Kram’s (1985) stance that effective mentoring relationships address *both* the work/career related dimension and the psychosocial dimension.

**The value of the mentoring relationship to mentees**

On a continuum scale the mentees were asked to give a rated value of their overall experience of their mentoring relationships. The results (see Fig. 4) reveal four of the mentees rated the experience at the higher end of the continuum. The mentees who rated their mentoring experience as of moderate value (two) qualified their rating with: *“It was too large a problem to be addressed in a six month mentoring scheme”* and *“I have been too busy to take full advantage of the process. My fault not my mentors.”*

	Excellent Value 5	4	3	2	Little Value 1
Mentees	3	2	1		

**Figure 4: Overall rated value by Mentees of their mentoring experience**

It could be inferred that the mentees’ generally high rating of their overall mentoring experience is a direct result of having received what they expected and desired from the mentoring relationship. The literature states it is essential there is absolute clarity of roles, expectations and knowledge of what constitutes the mentoring relationship. To achieve this in the UNITEC Mentoring Programme the mentees were required to complete a self-assessment

task to identify their issues and the skills they most wanted to develop. Therefore, their expectations were articulated and the potential for confusion and disappointment was lessened.

### **What constituted value to Mentees**

The mentors and mentees were asked what was the specific value of the mentoring relationship to the mentees. The responses were grouped into six themes- *distance, providing strategies, nurtured and supported, reflection on own processes, organisational knowledge and practising e.g. role-play*. (Fig. 5)

Value	Distance	Provide Strategies	Nurtured & Supported (Listened to)	Reflection – Own Processes	Organisational Knowledge	Practising e.g. Role Play	Totals	
								as % of total
Mentors	0	1	2	5	2	2	12	32%
Mentees	6	5	6	5	3	1	26	68%
Kram's Function Categories	Psychosocial Functions				Career Functions			100%

**Figure 5: Value of the mentoring relationship to mentees - Mentor & Mentee Perceptions**

#### **The value of distance and being nurtured and supported**

The value of ‘distance’ and ‘being nurtured and supported’ were identified equally (6) as the greatest value to Mentees from the mentoring relationship. The value of mentors being distant from the workplace was articulated as: *“Neutral environment to layout my issues”*; *“independent ear and voice”*; *“someone on campus not involved in the day to day dramas”*. Connected to this was the advantage of a breadth of perspective that mentors could introduce: *“Providing perspective – ability to look at the issues in a wider context”* *“...not caught up in the heat issues generate”*; *“a reality check”*.

Interestingly, ‘distance’ was not mentioned by any mentor. This is an important finding in that mentors need to be aware of the value to mentees of this distance factor. It may remove some of the myth of the mentor having to be “all wise” for it appears just by being unattached and separated from the situation is value in itself.

‘Being nurtured and supported’ in a mentoring relationship offered a means for reducing isolation as one mentee put it: *“ just knowing someone was there”*. Also the mentors fulfilled one of the key functions of mentoring by facilitating the release of pent up anger and frustration expressed by another mentee as: *“.. able to express and combat some negative feelings I have towards my co-workers”* Another frequently expressed value was: *“being listened to gave me a sense of value in everything.”*

#### **The value of reflection on own processes and being assisted with strategies**

It is important to acknowledge that mentoring is not just about helping a mentee with problems and concerns. Whilst support is a key mentoring purpose Daloz (1986) adds two purposes which combine to provide a mainspring for learning - that of pointing out the way and challenging beliefs and values held. Therefore it was encouraging in this study to

discover mentees placed high and equal value (5) on having the opportunity to reflect on their own processes and in that process receive assistance with strategies. Reflective practice has been in the forefront of educational learning for the last decade and it appears mentors in this programme have fulfilled the vital role of enabling mentees to carry out reflective, self analytic review. Smith (1996,11) says “at the heart of the mentoring process lies self review”. Various mentees’ comments attest to this value: “*I don’t usually take time for reflection – it was great to do so*”; “*A valuable time for reflection and goal setting*”. This reflection on own processes is further highlighted by the mentors who named it as the main value they hoped their mentees would gain from the mentoring relationship, that is, supporting the mentee whilst they did their own learning.

**Organisational knowledge and practising**

For mentees the value of organisational knowledge and practising were rated behind the others at three and one, respectively. This very closely corresponds with the mentors perceptions at two for both. When these results are placed in Kram’s (1988) categories (Fig.5) it can be seen the mentees most valued those aspects which perform psychosocial functions - encouragement, friendship, advice and guidance. This replicates the findings in a mentoring study with students by Allen et al (1997) where the degree of satisfaction with the mentoring relationships directly related to the degree to which psychosocial functions were served.

**Mentors perceptions of value to themselves and would they do it again?**

In the mentoring literature it is common to find statements that both partners derive benefit from the mentoring relationship (Douglas, 1997; Carruthers, 1993). In Figure 6 Mentors in this study indicate the value to themselves and all stated they would do it again. Reasons given were: “...to further practise my skills” and “it was very satisfying, even when a tad frustrating”.

Kram’s Function Categories	Informed my own reflection	Practised Skills	Broadened Organisational Knowledge	Would you do it again?	
				Yes	No
	6	5	2	6	0
	Psychosocial Functions		Career Functions		

**Figure 6: Mentors perceptions of value to themselves**

All the mentors stated they valued the stimulus to their own reflection. The mentoring exchanges afforded an opportunity to clarify or sharpen their own processes and practices. As one mentor explained: “*I learned heaps about myself in this role – my rescuer tendency, my levels of questioning – hugely beneficial and developmental*”. An added bonus was “*I had an opportunity to practice my skills and get feedback from my mentee.*” A second benefit five mentors identified was practising skills that included active listening, questioning and advise giving. A third benefit arose from hearing about practices elsewhere and two commented that it broadened their organisational knowledge: “*made me realise different departments have similar issues*” and “*gave me more knowledge of issues outside my Faculty*”. Lastly, several of the mentors remarked on how enjoyable their exchanges with colleagues had been. Research by Farren et al (1994) and Murphy (1996) has shown that mentoring enhances the self-image of mentors, as they are able to see themselves as competent, helpful and have ‘personal currency’. When the mentor perceptions of value to themselves are placed in Kram’s categories (Fig.6) it can be seen that both functions are present although the psychosocial functions slightly outweigh the career

functions. This weighting towards valuing the psychosocial function of the mentoring relationship is a recurrent theme throughout this study. Researchers such as Noe's (1988) conclude that where formal mentoring relationships provide psychosocial support but limited career support the programme may have limited effectiveness. In this present study both functions were present especially in the workplace issues covered although in the terms of value of the mentoring relationship to both mentors and mentees - the value of the psychosocial functions does dominate. Ideally a combination of these functions best serves the benefits of a mentoring relationship (Kram, 1988).

The fact that this pilot group was entirely composed of women may also lead to a conclusion that this stronger value for psychosocial support is indicative of female importance placed on friendship and support. Such an interpretation can be balanced by the survey data from an Australian study (Marshall et al, 1998) where a mixed group of early career academics gave unanimous support to the presence of the psychosocial dimension as a key quality of an effective mentoring relationship.

## **Conclusion**

This pilot UNITEC Mentoring Scheme has demonstrated that a formal mentoring programme can make a worthwhile contribution to the quality of working life in an organisation. The mentees and mentors both highly valued their formal mentoring experience especially those aspects that were psychosocial in nature. The overall results of this study align with Gibb's (1999) notion of the modern consensus of mentoring, which influenced by humanist beliefs, sees mentoring as being basically about supporting "psychosocial development." Either way the effectiveness of formal mentoring programmes may be better evaluated by assessing how well the programme meets the needs of participants and their satisfaction with the experience, rather than by solely examining the extent to which different functions are served.

The success of this scheme can in part be attributed to the design of the programme which allowed for an extended concept of mentoring, one that included, but also went beyond the traditional guidance and sponsorship notion of mentoring to that of consulting with the mentee to build self confidence and self reflective capabilities to better relate to the workplace. Whilst the results of this study reveal overall a successful formal mentoring programme has been implemented the following limitations need to be acknowledged. This is a small sample pilot study and therefore generalisability of the results is limited. Also there is a reliance on self-report data gathered from one questionnaire, this was necessary because perceptions regarding the mentoring experience were the focus of theoretical interest. It is also acknowledged that the data was collected at the closure of the mentoring relationship and therefore may not tell the full story, as it maybe after time and further reflection that Mentee and Mentor perceptions may alter.

Formal Mentoring Programmes are just one of several initiatives higher education organisations can include and resource to help develop staff. It is not suggested that such programmes replace informal mentoring, but rather supplement other mentoring activities within an organisation. Nor is it suggested that formal mentoring programmes should be a compulsory aspect of an organisation's operation but rather a strategy which management encourage and where participation is voluntary. Formal mentoring programmes can be effective as part of an overall professional development strategy but cannot compensate for structural inadequacies. Mentoring is a low cost to an organisation in comparison with other professional development interventions, but there is an 'opportunity' cost for individuals in

terms of their time and effort. If the procedures and processes are well structured, supported and clearly communicated to busy staff who get high value for the time they invest there is a greater chance to improve the quality of work life and organisational effectiveness.

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