Reluctant Mentors and Resistant Protégés: Welcome to the “Real” World of Mentoring

When I achieved my first job as an assistant professor in a rural southeastern university, my department chair assigned me a mentor, a white male full professor. The first words my mentor said to me were indicative of his feelings concerning being my mentor: “I didn’t know I would have to mentor you.” In our only meeting in my crucial first year as an assistant professor, my mentor gave me this advice: “In this town, there are only two things to do: have sex or eat. So don’t get fat.” Needless to say, my experience with my reluctant mentor left much to be desired; I resisted his advice, and sought and found other helpful mentors who have supported me in my career (Hansman, 2002a).

The word “mentor” may bring to mind various images of supportive people who have aided us and continue to uphold us in our professional and personal lives. Indeed, Levinson et al. (1978) defined a mentor as a “teacher, advisor, or sponsor,” (p. 97) and Daloz (1999) invokes mysticism and tells us that “mentors give us the magic that allows us to enter the darkness; a talisman to protect us from evil spells, a gem of wise advice, a map, and sometimes simply courage” (p. 18). Cohen (1995) describes mentoring as a one-to-one relationship. In order for the relationship to evolve, he prescribes a series of recommended hierarchical steps for the mentoring dyad. In some ways, mentoring seems quite straightforward: mentors guide and assist mentees or protégés, who, as the literature indicates, should be happy to have their help.

Mentoring: A Complex Enterprise

However, as my story above illustrates, not everyone wants to be a mentor. And to complicate the situation, not everyone wants to be a protégé and may resist the advice and “help” of their mentors. For example, in a recent research project concerning a formal mentoring program in a southeastern high-tech organization, my research partner and I found instances where protégés actively resisted the advice and encouragement given to them by mentors. For example, Leigh, a white woman protégé, was ambivalent about the program and whether it would be helpful to her; Leigh’s ambivalence manifested itself in her reluctance to participate in meetings with her mentor. Dina, another white female protégée, felt that she did not connect with her mentor, and Tania, another white protégé, felt her white woman mentor might not truly be interested in her well-being since her mentor had a close relationship with Tania’s white male boss. In short, Tania lacked confidence in her mentor, and because of this lack of confidence, felt she could not be open and honest with her. Tricia, a young African-American protégé with a white woman mentor, felt that her mentor’s suggestions for strategies for Tricia to be more assertive and aggressive in office meetings were not...
approaches that Tricia felt comfortable trying, particularly when she was the only woman in a room full of white men. In Tricia’s mentoring relationship, her mentor failed to recognize the personal and cultural characteristics that made being assertive impossible for Tricia, especially in the political and social culture of this particular organization. In this formal mentoring program, the protégés’ resistance to the dominant cultural norm within the organization was perceived by their mentors as the protégés simply not being willing to do “what it takes” to succeed in the organization (Mabry & Hansman, 2003).

As helpful as mentoring is meant to be, as the examples above illustrate, mentoring relationships can be difficult enterprises for mentors, protégés, and others involved in mentoring processes or programs. Other researchers have also recognized these complexities of mentoring relationships. For example, in Daloz’s first edition of Effective Teaching and Mentoring (1986), he enthusiastically discloses flourishing mentoring relationships that added depth to the lives of all persons involved. However, in the second edition of his book (1999), he includes examples of failed mentoring relationships and the reasons for these failures. Clearly, mentoring relationships may be enriching for some but can be problematic for others. Unfortunately, these “others” may include women and people of color whose ethnicity, race, class, gender, or sexual orientation may not be reflective of the dominant culture within their organizations. They may not have as many opportunities to participate in mentoring relationships, or if they are able to form mentoring relationships, may encounter difficulties due to these factors.

**Mentoring Challenges**

Women may encounter barriers forming and maintaining mentoring relationships, particularly in cross-gender mentoring. First, because males, and especially white males, still dominate upper-level management in most organizations, women may have difficulty initiating and maintaining mentoring relationships with males in leadership positions who may be reluctant to act as mentors, may be worried about sexual harassment issues, or who may simply not be interested in cross-gender mentoring. Women who serve as mentors to males may also have similar concerns. Second, if women protégés are able to find women leaders who are willing to mentor them, the protégés may have unrealistic or unmet expectations of their women mentors and may demand more time and energy than the female mentors are capable of giving. The women leaders may find themselves overwhelmed and not capable of mentoring all of the women who would like to be mentored by them. Finally, because women may “step out” and then back into the workforce due to family obligations, they may have trouble finding mentors, both men and women, who think they are “serious” about their careers and willing to invest the time and energy to mentor them (Hansman, 1998; 2002b).

Sociocultural factors can challenge cross-race and cross-gender mentoring relationships, and the racial and/or gender makeup of the participants in mentoring relationships affects the overall mentoring experiences of both mentors and protégés. Race and ethnicity may also create impediments to mentoring relationships within organizations. White mentors may hold negative images concerning women or minority protégés and withhold needed support from their protégés until they think that they are worth the investment of their time and energy. Women and persons of color may face more barriers to participating in mentoring relationships than white males because they are more likely to have low status within an organization and to have been “filtered out” of key positions by organizational politics. In short, women, persons of color, and others may not fit into the organization’s dominant view of what is considered “management material;” this dominant culture may not allow them to be mentored, or if they are mentored, may cause difficulties within the relationship for both mentors and protégés (Hansman, 2002b). Mentors need to recognize and be aware that their protégés may experience racism, gender, and/or other discrimination in their day-to-day life within the organization particularly in organizations whose dominant culture does not acknowledge difference in employees. Mentors who are not aware of or who disregard personal or cultural characteristics of their protégés, such as in the case of Tricia’s mentor described earlier in this article, are not helping their protégés, and in fact, are further excluding their protégés from participating within the mentoring relationship and the culture of the organization.

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2002) discuss mentoring as occurring on two dimensions: the internal dimension, which is the relationship between the mentor and protégé, and the external aspect that encompasses the mentoring pair and the sponsoring or host organization. Within both the internal and external dimensions, mentoring is a socially constructed power relationship, and the power that mentors have and exercise within mentoring relationships can be helpful or hurtful to protégés. The nature of mentoring relationships is that protégés have less power and may be vulnerable to the whims of their mentors and of the dominant culture within the sponsoring organization. For mentoring relationships to be successful and helpful to protégés, open discussions and negotiations of power and interests must take place among mentors, protégés, and the organization in which mentoring relationships occur (Hansman, 2002a, 2002b).
Helping Mentors and Protégés

So how can we address these concerns about mentoring relationships? First, trust is crucial for successful mentoring, particularly in cross-gender/cross-cultural relationships. Mentors must realize the power they have as mentors and be aware of the vulnerability of their protégés due to this power imbalance. Further, they must recognize the trust that protégés instill in them for guidance and support. Mentors and protégés must openly and honestly discuss the biases—racial, gender, or other stereotypical notions—that are held by mentors, protégés, and the sponsoring organization. These concepts may seem invisible to the relationship, both internal and external, but they directly impact the quality of support and help given to protégés (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002).

Second, white mentors, both male and female, should appreciate the obstacles women and people of color face and understand that they may need to be sensitive and culturally responsive to these barriers as they mentor their protégés. Third, organizations must address concerns about cross-gender/cross-race mentoring through training sessions for mentors and protégés that focus on issues of power, race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Through training, mentors may gain understanding of the importance of providing culturally sensitive developmental help to their protégés, and mentors and protégés may gain a better understanding of the dominant culture within their organizations. Finally, mentors, in their positions of power, must be proactive and advance frank discussions within these workshops of the cultural and political conditions that may support one group of people at the expense of others, such as women and minorities. From these discussions, other forms of education and training that promote understanding of cultural differences should be planned to help encourage change of harmful accepted norms within the organization.

I like to believe that if the reluctant mentor I described in the opening paragraph had been told he would be my mentor and had been given some training concerning cross-gender mentoring, he might have realized that his remarks to me were offensive and not particularly helpful to me. Perhaps he would have thought of other, more helpful ways to support me in my first year as a professor. I might not have been a resistant protégé had I felt that I could trust his advice and that he was concerned with my career growth and well-being.

Supportive mentoring relationships can contribute to the psychosocial development of individuals, and helpful mentors can greatly enhance a person’s career or personal development. Mentoring relationships can be powerful and life-changing events in people’s lives. Protégés, obviously, gain much from supportive and caring mentors. Mentors also gain from these relationships; their selflessness as mentors and the generativity achieved by them through their involvement with their protégés can add richness to their lives. At the same time, these mentoring relationships, which can be so powerful in shaping people’s lives, can run afoul and cause distress to protégés, mentors, and sponsoring organizations. Through addressing the challenging issues that may contribute to reluctant mentors and resistant protégés, mentoring will continue to be a viable form of education and support for adult learners.

References