

Implementing Successful Mentoring Programs: Career Definition vs. Mentoring Approach

Kirsten M. Poulsen,
CEO and Management Consultant, KMP+ House of Mentoring

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present the challenges posed by designing and implementing mentoring programs when program coordinators, managers and participants may hold different assumptions about what mentoring is and what career development is. It aims to create an awareness of the inherent conflict.

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KMP+ House of Mentoring ApS
Kongevejen 155, 2830 Virum, Telefon 39 76 12 32, Mail info@kmpplus.com, www.house-of-mentoring.com



The Definition of Career

“Old meaning: a course of professional advancement; usage is restricted to occupational groups with formal hierarchical progression, such as managers and professionals. New meaning: the unfolding sequence of any person’s work experience over time”

– quote from the “Boundaryless Career” by Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau, 1996, Oxford University Press.

The concept of careers has changed with the changing focus in the workplace. Moving from the industrial economy to the knowledge-based economy through the turbulent times of the IT-bubble, the meaning of career has changed from being an objective, externally defined concept to a subjective, internally defined concept. Careers used to be for the few lucky ones, most often men, and the external signs of success were titles, salaries, and moving up the hierarchical ladder – mainly as a manager. This old definition placed a lot of responsibility on the organization for supplying careers to the talented and ambitious employees; and if you were loyal and played by the company rules, and allied yourself with the right people, you could have a lifetime’s career in one organization.

In the knowledge-based economy we are now talking about intelligent careers¹ and boundaryless careers². Technology and knowledge are changing so fast that there can be no guarantee of a lifelong career in any one profession or organization. Career is now your whole work life no matter if it goes up, down, sideways or on hold for a while, e.g. while having children or taking a year-long sabbatical to sail around the world; and the individual is the only one who can determine whether this is a successful career. This places the responsibility for the career on the individual who no longer can (or want to) rely on the organization to set the rules and provide standard careers. Each person is responsible for his/her own market value, and for making good career decisions according to own subjective criteria - criteria that may change through different periods of life. This requires much more of each person in understanding his/her own motivation, skills, and ambitions and in choosing the right opportunities.

The definition of mentoring

When you look at literature from the UK and from the USA it is evident that there are different ideas of what mentoring can and should do.

“In the USA mentors are generally defined as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and career support to their mentees – often called protégés.”
(Kram, 1985).

Even though many researchers and consultants today have started writing about mentors also as catalysts for development, US mentoring and research into mentoring is still very much focused on the mentor seen as a career sponsor, advisor and door opener – the expert.

In the UK there is a clearer focus on the mentor’s role as a guide, counsellor and coach. David Clutterbuck and Nadine Klasen³ talks about mentoring as a “learning alliance (that is) tapping into talent”. Clutterbuck argues that whereas the US mentoring model assumes that the mentor has more seniority and power than the mentee, the most important aspect of the UK model is that the mentor has relevant experience which

¹ Michael B. Arthur, Priscilla H. Claman & Robert J. DeFillippi: Intelligent enterprise, intelligent careers, Academy of Management Executive, 1995, Vol. 9 No. 4.

² Michael B. Arthur & Denise Rousseau: The Boundaryless Career, Oxford University Press, 1996.

³ Nadine Klasen with David Clutterbuck: Implementing Mentoring Schemes, Butterworth & Heinemann 2002.

is valuable to the mentee and that the mentee takes responsibility for his/her own learning. Clutterbuck's position is that career development often is an indirect effect of the personal and professional development that in turn create more opportunities for career advancement. The point is that the mentor's role is to assist in this transition – not to do the mentee's work for him/her.

We have come across these three popular ways of distinguishing the different approaches to mentoring programs:

Sage on the Stage
Guide on the Side
Learning Alliance

Let's have a look at how these three ways of seeing mentoring fit with the ways of understanding careers and the knowledge-based economy:

Mentoring: Sage on the Stage

The notion of the mentor being the important person in the mentoring relationship, the person who has the experience, the network, the power and the influence, is the picture of the "Sage on the Stage". The more important, influential and well-known the mentor is, the more this reflects on the mentee, in the sense that: "if this person (mentor) will spend his (most often a man) time and efforts helping this other person (mentee), then this other person must be worth it and have some special talents".

In this kind of mentoring program, the mentor is expected to advise the mentee, to recommend actions, to open doors, and to help the mentee establish new alliances to move ahead in his/her career. It is the mentor who defines what the right moves are to achieve the right career success, and success is most often associated with externally visible signs such as title, position, salary etc. Mentee is seen more as a protégé – a word that is often used in mentoring programs in the USA – meaning "under the care and protection of another"⁴.

This way of seeing mentoring is really connected to the old way of understanding career – the objective definition of career. In this career understanding you must ally yourself with somebody from "the establishment" – the old boys' network? – to gain access to power and influence and to climb the organizational ladder.

Mentoring: Guide on the Side

Looking at the large survey done on mentoring best practices in Canada in 2003⁵, the primary role of the mentor still is that of an adviser, a teacher and a model: "Essentially, becoming a mentor means helping to reveal the life's dream of the protégé or less experienced person...over time this becomes a special relationship that supports the personal development of the mentee". Listening to this and to the program coordinators and reading the book on the survey, there seem to be a move away from focusing on the mentor as an important, visible sponsor for the mentee, to the mentor being more of a guide, supporting the mentee in transitions at work. Thus, the skills and experiences and overall knowledge of the mentor become more important than his/her visible career success and networks. This is a step on the way to understanding mentoring as a "learning alliance".

This way of understanding mentoring is moving towards the new career understanding. The mentor supports the mentee who is taking his/her own career choices on transitions at work.

⁴ Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc.

⁵ Les Éditions de la Fondation de l'entrepreneuriat: Mentoring and the World of Work in Canada: Source Book of Best Practices, 2003 – the work was funded in part by the Government of Canada and presented in a conference in March 2004 in Toronto.

Mentoring: Learning Alliance

Talking about mentoring as a learning alliance takes the focus completely away from the mentor and onto the action in the relationship – the learning – for both mentor and mentee. In this kind of relationship, we talk about counselling, coaching, asking good questions and telling good stories. Here it is not so important who the mentor is, since the mentor is not visible to other people around the mentee. However, it is important that the mentor has experience and skills that are relevant to the mentee, since the mentor is expected to offer his/her experience and stories as an inspiration to the mentee. The mentee is not offered final solutions but is presented with stories that can inspire, ideas that can be built upon and questions that will lead to reflection. In this way the mentee is able to build new solutions for him-/herself, and after implementing the new solutions the mentee will evaluate and discuss the results with the mentor in a new round of reflection.

However, a learning alliance is a two-way street where also the mentor can and should focus on his/her own learning. Listening to the mentee's challenges and concerns, hearing stories from other parts of the organizational hierarchy, observing other people through the eyes of the mentee, and achieving new knowledge about other professions, gives the mentor the opportunity to reflect on his/her own behaviour at work, to question his/her own decisions on how to handle challenging situations, and to gain new knowledge about people, about the organization and about other professions.

This kind of mentoring is very much in line with the new way of understanding careers. Both parties in the mentoring relationship are responsible for their own learning, for taking action on this learning, and both parties are responsible for fulfilling their roles as mentor and mentee bringing all their knowledge, skills and experience to the table in an honest and open way which will create the best possible learning arena for both.

What happens when the mentoring and career assumptions do not fit?

Moving back to the definitions of careers: objective, external success factors vs. subjective, internal success factors, we see many potential challenges for implementing successful mentoring programs – and we have experienced several of these in existing mentoring programs.

Focusing on the “**Sage on the Stage**” who represents the objective career definition where the mentor is the expert who can advise and open doors that will lead the mentee in the right direction, the question becomes what is the right direction? Since market conditions are changing, the economy is changing and the needs for competencies are changing, maybe the mentor's perception of what the right direction is, is not valid anymore. This could mean that the mentor is sending the mentee in a direction that will seem successful in the short term but will lead to a dead-end in the long term for both the mentee and the organization. This way of mentoring will only cement the old way of working and thinking, so if there is a need for organizational change, you need another kind of mentoring.

Another risk is that the mentee will not be receptive to this kind of mentor behaviour and will react negatively to the mentor, resulting in a dysfunctional mentoring relationship. This could give the mentoring program a bad reputation in the organization as well as lead to participants dropping out of the program, and maybe mentees leaving the company completely.

This situation can happen for various reasons. Maybe the national culture is very focused on authority and power (think about Hofstede and others presenting the dimensions of national cultures), or maybe the culture in the organization is very focused on the old career definition. Maybe you have many employees with very high seniority who has lived the old career definition of climbing the ladder by being loyal, hardworking and supporting the right decisions and right superiors. Whatever the reason is, it is important

to be aware of these underlying assumptions in the company and among the managers and employees as you make your decision for a mentoring program.

Moving to the mentor who works as a “**Guide on the Side**” we are much more aligned with the subjective career definition. The mentor is now seen as a catalyst for change and development in the mentee, so the mentor is still important though not visible to others. Here the mentor is most often seen as a transition guide, which means that the mentee has already made a career decision and the focus is now on making the move successful. The challenges here are of a different kind, namely the mentor has to find the right balance between giving advice to a person who is insecure and inexperienced and asking for advice to specific situations, and coaching, counselling and creating space for reflection for the mentee to find his/her own solutions. The mentor, though, is still seen as the knowledgeable and experienced person who transfers some of his/her knowledge to the mentee and guides the mentee into the relevant reflections.

In the “**Learning Alliance**” we have moved completely into the new career definition. Here there is a mutual focus on learning and no predetermined ideas of what the right direction or right solutions are. Both parties realize that they can learn from each other and are open for exploration, strange questions, creative discussions and new solutions. The mentor’s main role is to act as a facilitator to create learning opportunities, as well as openly present his/her own reflections not only on the situation of the mentee, but also on how the mentor can use these reflections in his/her own work life. These kinds of reflections can again lead the mentee to new reflections and together they create new insights of value to both parties.

If, however, you implement a mentoring program in an organization – especially an international organization – you risk having both mentors and mentees with different assumptions and expectations about mentoring programs. This can lead to a lot of confusion and unfulfilled expectations. You may find mentees in some organizations and countries still are very focused on the old career definition, and they will expect mentors to support and direct them and to give them the “right” answers. They will not be satisfied with a “learning alliance” mentor. In fact, you will find mentors and mentees at all points of the scale, which will challenge you in designing the mentoring program and the matching process to fit the people and the organization.

How do you deal with these challenges?

Of course, there is no single right solution to these challenges. The main issue is to be very aware of the potential problems that may arise from different assumptions about career and mentoring.

This places a great deal of responsibility on those who design and implement the mentoring programs. It is in this phase that you need to consider different underlying assumptions in relation to what you wish to achieve through the mentoring program. You need to make quite sure what the purpose of the mentoring program is, and how this will support the goals and strategies of the organization. You need to be certain of how top management thinks about mentoring and how they will act to support the program both as top managers and as mentors; and you need to establish clear criteria for selecting the right mentors and mentees as participants in the program. Remember, those you choose for the mentoring program will become role models for the other employees in the organization, and it will send a strong signal to everybody about what the “right” behaviour, values and performance is in this organization.

Holding individual interviews with all relevant candidates for the program – both mentors and mentees – can be very valuable to really understand their motivation for entering the program and to explore their expectations as well as their assumptions about the roles of mentoring. This is an excellent way of gaining knowledge that can be helpful in the final selection of candidates and in matching mentors and mentees.

Seminars and workshops to introduce the participants to the mentoring program as well as to train in the roles of being mentor and mentee are also valuable in creating a common platform for the program.

Participants need to understand the purpose of the mentoring program and identify their own goals. They need to understand and train in the roles of mentor and the mentee, and they need to learn how the mentoring relationship can unfold and create learning for both parties – learning that will also be beneficial to the organization. The better prepared and trained both mentors and mentees are, the better they are able to create results together avoiding the traps of misunderstandings.

To ensure that you as a program coordinator take all these elements into account when designing and implementing mentoring programs nationally or internationally, we encourage you to find and develop your own generic model for mentoring – a model or checklist which will help you consider all the relevant aspects of mentoring program as well as whether a mentoring program is the right solution to the development need in your organization.

**Mentoring – from the participants' perspective**

Mentoring is a learning partnership between two people with different levels of experience and with the potential to achieve new learning, new insight and personal growth.

Mentoring is about creating synergy between two people in a learning alliance.

Mentoring – from the organization's perspective

Mentoring is a strategic development activity that supports the organization's vision, goals and values and the participant's own development needs and wishes.

**KMP+ House of Mentoring**

Kongevejen 155
2830 Virum
Denmark

Phone: +45 39 76 12 32

Email: info@kmpplus.com

KMP+ House of Mentoring is a consulting house established in the year 2000, focused on enhancing leadership and talent development through professional mentoring programmes. We design and deliver state-of-the-art mentoring programmes based on research and good practice and are continuously seeking to increase our knowledge of how to ensure optimal outcome of development initiatives – for the participants as well as for the organisation. Together with the client, we ensure that development activities are relevant and meaningful to the individual as well as to the organisation as well as connected to strategic objectives.

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