Intangibility of the invisible hand – Analysing the micro-dynamics of novice mentoring program based upon one institutional experience

DINESH KUMAR. V1, MD; ANEESH BASHEER2, MD

1Department of Anatomy, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research, Puducherry, India; 2Department of Medicine, Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences, Puducherry, India

Abstract

Although mentoring has been regarded as an essential component in the developmental phase of medical students, it is the nature of hierarchical relationship and the quality of emotional exchange which determine its sustainability. With great enthusiasm, we had launched our mentoring program for the new entrants of our medical school. After an initial faculty development workshop on mentoring, we framed our guidelines for implementing the program. To measure the relationship satisfaction on both sides and self-efficacy, we used relationship satisfaction scales. As the winds offered us the beginner’s fortune, our program went on well for the first six months. Slowly, the colour of the mentorship program began to fade. Students began to find excuses for not meeting their mentors and the sessions truncated into a “hay- how do you do – bye” meetings. Through this commentary, we would like to introspect the factors which would have dampened the interest. Would it be the asynchronous agency support or lack of motivation / self-efficacy or roadblocks in Communication Bridge or lack of adequate matching or lack of need? The outcomes of our introspection would be of help for others who run the mentorship programs or who wish to install in their own institutes.

Keywords: Mentoring, Medical school, Medical students

Introduction

Having a mentor in learning organizations is critical for the adaptation of a novice to the realms of adult learning. Mentors, by their involvement and guidance, can catalyze enormous differences in the lives of their mentees beyond the reach of traditional teaching. Novice mentoring can be defined as, “a dynamic, context-dependent, goal-sensitive and mutually beneficial relationship between an experienced faculty member and an undergraduate student which focused upon advancing the development of the mentee” (1). Though informal mentoring practices had been practiced by the faculty at our institution, we were keen in installing a systematic novice mentoring program for the new entrants into the medical school. Since we had faced certain issues related to adjustment of the students to increased academic load and new environment, our cardinal objectives were more towards acclimatizing students towards psychosocial functions of the learning organization (2) and enabling them achieve self-satisfied accomplishments during the first year of medical education. Based on the previous studies related to mentoring (3, 4), we perceived that a single person was highly unlikely to meet all the mentoring needs of a young protégé, emphasizing the need for different mentors for different phases of his/her career. Therefore, we planned for a longitudinal approach whereby students would be mentored by the
first year faculty members and sequentially, para-clinical and clinical year faculty would follow up until the final year. After analyzing various existing mentorship models, we framed a hybrid mentoring model combining the traits of traditional dyadic and functional mentoring models (5) considering the mission statement of the institute. It had the advantages of shaping personal development of students by offering them emotional support and encouragement and at the same time, recruiting first year faculty as mentors would help the students reach their corresponding academic goal.

How had we implemented the program?
Preparations for the program began with meetings of the potential mentors and the administrative colleagues, resulting in brainstorming on need and scope of mentoring. A draft of the program was developed at the end of preparatory discussions. All planning activities were spearheaded and coordinated by the office of the dean of undergraduate studies. A briefing session for mentees was conducted to make them aware of the utility of the program. As most faculty members were unaware of the dynamics and composite domains of the mentor-mentee relationship, a comprehensive workshop was conducted to enlighten them about the basic concepts of team building, professionalism in mentoring, ways of gathering information from students and giving appropriate feedback. Based on the similarity-attraction theory (6) which posits that individuals subconsciously tend to interact with people who are similar to themselves and based on the evidence (7) which suggests that same-gender mentoring relationships are associated with higher comfort and communication levels by increasing the emotional receptivity of the protégé, we opted for same gender matched mentoring dyads. Owing to practical difficulties, we could not afford vetted matching of the mentor-mentees. Each faculty member was allotted five mentees and preliminary meeting between them was conducted to establish codes of conduct and timelines. We suggested that mentors interact with mentees periodically and develop a conducive mentoring environment for themselves. In order to oversee the mentoring progress, the dean’s office evaluated satisfaction of both mentor and mentee by confidential feedback mechanism in addition to the mentoring program as a whole.

The surprising outcomes we had encountered
Generally, the outcomes of mentoring relationships depend upon two factors: 1) prioritizing mentee interests and 2) power dynamics existing within the dyad. In the negotiating phase, i.e. the initial few meetings we expected the dyads to arrive at an agreement on learning goals and work out on the boundaries of relationship. In concordance with our expectations, in the initial month both mentors and mentees showed great interest in developing the relationship. As the days progressed, students and faculty members experienced dilemma in distinguishing the professional identities between teachers and mentors. Some students envisaged their mentors as “authoritative figures” owing to the control they exhibit in the classroom and it made them uncomfortable in sharing their personal intricacies. Managing the power dynamics and seeing the student as a protégé is the crux for productive associations (4). The much needed self-examination and trust of mentorship dynamics (8) got withered as the days passed by, as the mentees avoided sharing genuine bothersome issues.

Secondly, mentors who attended the workshop were keen in approaching the relationship in a stereotypical manner. Indeed, mentorship requires more Phronesis for switching to different roles and responsibilities according to the existing needs demonstrated by the students. Three pathways of influence in mentorship have been suggested (9) namely; 1) providing direct and indirect feedback incorporated into the self-concept of students 2) serving as a reference for normative behaviors and 3) providing direct instruction for the accomplishment of academic goals. Upon conducting verbal autopsies, we found out that most of the mentoring relationships focused on the academic component only and they turned out to be an academic support session without addressing other domains. Some mentors had expected a Pygmalion effect out of their relationship and mentees who could not achieve their high expectations evaded regular meetings.

Thirdly, it was disheartening to find that mentees felt reluctant to meet their mentors on grounds of failure. Indeed, failures are common in the initial few months of medical school and one of the key factors in determining success of novice mentorship program is reassuring the mentees when they fail and to make them not dwell in the past. Paradoxically, academically good performers gained self-esteem and met their self-esteem tried to distance themselves from the mentors. This led to difficulties in overseeing the entire process. Mentors complained that their mentees were reluctant to respond to their
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recruited faculty belonging to different age
defeat the primary purpose itself. Since we
excessive paternalism might interfere with or
deficiency in development of an effective standard
progress, the unavailability of quality time was
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the smooth facilitation, we had recommended
another frequent barrier which impeded the effectiveness of mentoring
sessions was time constraints. Lastly, to aid
the initial zeal in the process. Some mentor-
mentee dyads were affected by the low levels of
establishing the relationship. Consistent with
another frequent barrier which impeded the effectiveness of mentoring
sessions was time constraints. Lastly, to aid
the smooth facilitation, we had recommended
meetings to be scheduled within the college
hours ("protected" time) and owing to the
other responsibilities, mentors could not make
themselves available at all sessions. Even though
cannot be matched to "self-absorption", one of
the negative mentoring experiences whereby the
mentors are preoccupied with their own career
progress, the unavailability of quality time was
detrimental to our program.

The lessons learned

Although literature on mentoring practices
has gradually gained a prominent platform in
the realm of medical education, there is a notable
deficiency in development of an effective standard
framework. After defining the goals and objectives,
we adopted a mentoring process overseen by the
host organization to ensure mentees are provided
with feasible opportunities. We had students from
different contexts and backgrounds and therefore,
designing a framework was a huge challenge.
The novice mentorship program was grounded on
social information processing theory (12) which
posits that individuals develop expectations
about appropriate behavior based on information
from their new environment. However, mentors
would serve as filters for incoming information
and help individuals interpret their learning
environment. Upon analysis, we could learn
that students, particularly at the time of higher
stress were seeking informal mentoring out of
formal framework. As there is not much need for
developing a shared goal in informal mentoring,
students choose their own emotional scaffolds
based on interpersonal attraction and mutual
identification.

Providing space for mentees to share their
concerns is vital in any mentoring dyad because
mentees are in a weaker position and this could
easily lead to diverging relationship. To be honest,
we believe that the initial two-day workshop on
mentoring practices was inadequate for faculty
to define the boundaries between responsibilities
of being a "teacher" and a "mentor". One factor
that can contribute to the success of mentorship
program is the inquisitive and challenging
attitude of the mentees. When mentees are
ready to question traditions and openly discuss
alternatives with mentors, it indicates the closing
power gap between the mentor and the mentee.
The importance of power distance or gap in
mentoring relationships has been emphasized
by Clutterbuck (13). Mentors, by virtue of being
teachers of varying academic ranks remained
judgmental and this potential conflict was likely
to be perceived by the mentee and subsequently
discouraged honest, open communication in
mentoring dyads.

The second lesson was that we should
have done vetted matching whereby personal
characteristics of mentors and mentees had to be
the central consideration. Thereby, both members
of the dyads could have learnt more about each
other and minimized the hierarchy in the initial
stages of relationship. The third lesson was
that even though mentoring can be considered
as an altruistic act beyond requirement for
incentives, the faculty members who acted as
"star mentors" could have been recognized and
acknowledged. This could prevent them from
viewing the program as yet another office ritual.
We could not demonstrate positive effects of
our program at this nascent stage; however, it
may have potential to influence attitudes and
shape careers of the protégés in the long run.
Achieving the "right chemistry" in mentoring
dyads is something which sounds easy on paper,
but highly complicated in reality.

The most important lesson was that we
should have developed a network for mentors. From the student’s perspective, many problems were addressed and mere provision of emotional support was not enough. It is also possible to refer the students who require additional support in terms of psychological counselling and so on. A communication platform, involving mentors and administrators, could have helped us in achieving effective measures for some of the common problems. Similarly, mid-point patch up programs for mentors and mentees separately would have helped us in troubleshooting the mismatch existing in dyads. Providing students an option of interacting with multiple mentors according to their needs and establishing coordination between mentors would have been a good alternative.

Conclusion
With the genuine interest expressed by the host organization in establishing a novice mentoring program, we tried our best for its meaningful implementation. However, we realized that a balance of consistency whilst retaining flexibility to meet the individual needs of mentees is required across the journey and understanding the complex interpersonal dynamics is often beyond the realms of assessment tools. Hard work, perseverance and several cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) are the cornerstones of a strong and dynamic mentorship program. Finally, establishment of a solid relationship early in the course of the mentorship program between the mentor and the mentee would go a long way in sustaining the program and ensuring that it bears the fruits expected of a good mentorship program.

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References