



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

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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

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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 mentors regularly while the others by losing 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

call; mentees complained that they could not establish adequate rapport. Some mentors even felt that some of their mentees had not perceived objectivity in the process and expected favoritism from them in academic activities.

Fourthly, although mentoring involves an elemental form of the parental impulse (10), excessive paternalism might interfere with or defeat the primary purpose itself. Since we recruited faculty belonging to different age groups and academic ranks, inter-generational hiccups were unavoidable. In the views of students, some mentors belonging to higher academic ranks were more paternalistic and exhibited authoritarian behavior. This influenced the students to establish relationships with faculty whom they felt at ease with, in other words, informal mentoring. We could not evaluate stipulated outcomes of our program as it became like mixing of oranges and apples. Further, formal mentors might have been less motivated than informal mentors since they were participating for mere official reasons rather than genuine interest for protégé's development (11).

Another peculiar problem we noticed was that solutions for some issues which bothered students were beyond the purview of the mentor. When these issues were left unaddressed, students lost the initial zeal in the process. Some mentor-mentee dyads were affected by the low levels of altruism demonstrated by the mentors in establishing the relationship. Consistent with previous literature (3) 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 it 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 a detrimental factor 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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