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Developing a Sequential Framework for Mentoring Student Project Teams in a Business School: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The use of an academic mentor and a sequential framework may improve both the functionality of student project teams and enhance the learning outcomes by building learning partnerships between the mentor and the team, and between the team members. The sequential framework has several phases: Establishing the ground rules, Team dynamics, Feedback and information sharing, Personal autonomy, Reaffirmation, Personal and professional growth outcomes, and Debriefing. This framework removes many of the personal dynamics that create detractor tensions within teams and enables a higher level of team functionality towards achieving negotiated outcomes. These outcomes will involve personal outcomes (leadership, co-ordination, tolerance etc) that develop throughout the mentorship as well as professional outcomes (that are usually imposed by course assessments). Desired levels for professional outcomes can be negotiated and established at the commencement of the mentorship, although reaffirmed during it. Professional outcomes typically culminate in some form of team presentation or report. A team debriefing enables closure and provides the mentor with informal evaluation of the mentoring arrangement.

Keywords: mentoring; mentoring framework; learning and mentoring; student project teams; student teamwork.

INTRODUCTION

Two limitations need to be highlighted in relation to the term mentoring and the use of student teamwork. Firstly, mentoring tends to be an idiosyncratic term without a clear and concise definition that adequately bridges the distortions that arise from its use in both education and 'industry' situations. Secondly, despite rhetoric about the importance of developing teams in the business world, there has been little written about implementation of mentoring programs by business schools and there is a gap in the literature so far as mentored teams (in tertiary education) is concerned. This is surprising when comments abound such as 'educators believe that group projects are an increasingly essential part of classroom assignments. The working world is one of working groups; and student exposure to the benefits and pitfalls of group work is assumed to be beneficial for all students' (Becker & Dwyer 1998:61).

This paper briefly outlines issues from a theoretical overview of teamwork, learning and mentoring before considering common models for mentoring. It then relays the background against which the sequential mentoring framework was conceived. The framework is then discussed before concluding with issues that require further consideration.

TEAMWORK, LEARNING AND MENTORING - A Theoretical Summary.

Team based student projects in University study have been used by a range of disciplines and with varying outcomes for the learners involved. Initial student reaction to teamwork is often negative and many would prefer not to be part of team based project work.

Notwithstanding that team work is used in many forms and variations in business studies, Mutch (1998:51) argues that on the one hand 'team working is seen as a means of harnessing creativity, of responding speedily and flexibly to changing circumstances and of developing synergies to far exceed the individual capabilities', while on the other hand 'there appears...to be a degree of confusion about what we use team work for. Is it to prepare students for the world or work and, if this is the case, how successfully does it actually mirror practice there? Or is it to promote learning and does this aim suffer because of mixed messages?'

Most literature appears to conflate the two issues that Mutch raises. That is, there is intent to expose students to the ‘reality’ of the work environment; however, it is done primarily in the context of promoting learning in an academic environment. This contention is supported by Humphreys et al. (1997) who discuss teamwork in terms of raising the level of student awareness of the dynamics of teamwork and the complexities of team-based approaches in a work environment. It is also discussed by Becker & Dwyer (1998:61) who report that ‘group work helps students learn to cooperate, count on member input and achievement, and live with group outcomes.’

Schlee (2000:5) reported from a study of mentoring programs in business schools that most students ‘...did not have clear goals as to what they expected from the mentoring relationship. The lack of student goals was the primary obstacle in forming effective mentor-student relationships’ and ‘...unmotivated students are the number one turn off for mentors. Mentors expect that the student(s) assigned to them will come prepared with questions and with an enthusiasm for learning...’ Campbell & Campbell (2000) reported similar findings.

Whilst Megginson (2000:2), based on a critique of Ragins & Cotton (1999), suggests that ‘formal mentoring seems not to yield significantly more outcomes than no mentoring at all’, Garvey & Alred (2000:4) propose that ‘in mentoring, the quality of the relationship is all important, which means that mentoring is essentially about learning in a social context and the learning which takes place, because it is social and all-engaging through a high-quality relationship, is of a higher order. In the light of this [they] argue that mentor educators need to primarily concern themselves with learning processes located within specific social contexts’. This also extends proposals by Mumford (1995:5) that ‘the most effective relationship between a mentor and a learner ensures that a learner goes round the complete learning cycle in relation to the situations, problems, opportunities being discussed. What is involved? What facts do you have about it? What conclusions have you drawn or can you now draw from the facts about what is involved? What will you do as a result of the conclusion you have reached?’

If the formality of the mentoring relationship is one determinant of the learning outcomes and their effectiveness, then the implicit mentoring models and frameworks that are used may also be determinants of the outcomes and effectiveness of the teamwork and the learning outcomes

that are achieved. Several authors commented on and proposed specific requirements for 'effective' models and frameworks that can be used for mentoring individuals.

MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR MENTORING INDIVIDUALS

Maynard & Furlong (1993 cited in Woodd 1997) identified three models of mentoring in their study of teacher education. These they called the apprenticeship model, the competency model and the 'reflective practitioner'. The first two models reflect the context of the trainee teacher learning from an experienced practitioner, and gaining the competencies of classroom practice. Only the reflective practitioner model gives the notion of sharing, of helping the mentee to examine their practice in a non-hierarchical, non-judgemental way. This model does not appear to rely on age difference between mentor and mentee nor even more experience, rather a joint exploration of practice to determine the sequence of events and possible alternative scenarios. It also hints at a mutual practice so that the mentor is a learner as well as the mentee. What is important is the process of reflection by the doer, the mentee, so that they can learn more from the process and perhaps become their own 'critical friend'.

Gay (1994:2) suggests that 'planned or facilitated mentoring programmes attempt to capture the power of positive informal mentoring relationships within an agreed and acceptable framework...planned mentoring programmes...provide a means for openly negotiating and agreeing to purpose, ground rules, duration and resources that can help to enhance training and development'.

Mumford (1994 cited in Woodd 1997) argues that a relationship with significant differences in learning styles is likely to be less productive than those where the individuals are similar in learning style, although this statement has not yet been substantiated.

Beattie & Holden (1994 cited in Hylan & Postlethwaite 1998) identify three phases to the mentoring relationship: firstly, introductions and the sharing of information and experiences; secondly, exploring and clarifying; and thirdly, action planning. They argue that within each relationship, rates of progress will vary and some may never reach the latter stages.

Garvey & Alred (2000:6) comment (in part) about several aspects. They suggest that mentors need to be clear about what they are doing; that it is important to clarify the boundaries of the relationship; that mentoring facilitates learning – it is a process; that mentors need support; that there needs to be commitment on both sides; that it should be focused on the mentee; and the mentor also learns from the relationship.

Whilst all of the aforementioned consider substantive process issues, there is no clear attempt to consider these in either a sequential manner or to relate the mentoring process to teams. These two issues will be focused upon in the remainder of this paper.

BACKGROUND TO DEVELOPING A SEQUENTIAL FRAMEWORK FOR MENTORING STUDENT TEAMS

The framework presented in this paper was developed over a four-year period. It centred on a mentoring program run in a regional Australian university's Faculty of Business and it involved third year day-mode undergraduate human resource management majors who were undertaking a capstone course. This course required them to conduct, for a business client, a major team-based consulting project which involved a significant human resource management issue. Teams ranged in size from 3-6 members and membership was determined according to the grade point average the respective student member had achieved in the remainder of their human resource management courses. This selection process therefore precluded considerations of age, gender and cultural background.

Mentors were 'recruited' from the departmental academic staff and this was typically on the basis of each being a 'coerced volunteer'. There was no formal training of mentors and only basic information about the course assessment requirements was provided. Mentors were assigned to a team on the basis of a loose consideration of their discipline expertise/interests and the nature of the client's major human resource management issue.

In the absence of either formal mentor training or a co-ordinated approach for the mentors, the following sequential framework was developed by one academic mentor over four project cycles. The initial framework was an informal process used for supervision of post-graduate student research thesis projects. This was modified and adapted progressively over four years

using action research techniques to plan, implement, evaluate and reflect on the processes and the outcomes. The following framework is the result of these processes.

A Sequential Framework for Mentoring Team Based Student Projects

- 1. Establishing ground rules**
- 2. Discussing the Team's dynamics and developing team cohesiveness**
- 3. Negotiating the processes for feedback and information sharing**
- 4. Managing the 'Personal Autonomy' Phase**
- 5. Reaffirming the mentor/mentee relationship and re-establishing the limits**
- 6. Personal and professional growth outcomes**
- 7. Debriefing**

DISCUSSION OF THE SEQUENTIAL FRAMEWORK'S DEVELOPMENT

1. Establishing ground rules

At the inaugural meeting, there was formal establishment of the expectations of both mentor and mentees and the identification and commitment to some ground rules. Bentley (1994:8) proposes that 'the important aspect of determining roles is to allow the team the space and time to clarify what is expected of them, and what they expect of others.'

The teams involved in the development of the mentoring framework usually had some underlying tension between themselves and the course leaders. This resulted from requirements of the course leaders (who delivered the formal academic lectures and conducted all assessments), the interpretations placed upon those requirements by the student team members, and the expectations of team members that their mentor would coach them in how to complete their assessments to achieve an optimal grading.

The mentor approached the ground rules by ensuring there was discussion about, agreement on and commitment to three core areas:

- The need to be available for meetings and work sessions etc and commitment to a regular meeting time for the duration of the project.
- There were processes that would be followed/used (eg. assessment queries would be taken up with the course leaders, the appointment of a team leader and the keeping of notes in the event of conflict within the team, that the mentor would be the final arbitrator on any disagreements etc.

- Affirmation that the relationship had a time limit (eg. to the end of the semester when the final presentations were made to the client).

Although this process will not eliminate all communication problems that might arise, the intention was to reach broad understanding of and commitment to a process. Becker & Dwyer (1998:61) suggest that ‘...no matter how groups are structured, problems with group communication tend to persist...not all group members contribute their share of work because of miscommunication, because face-to-face meetings may be nearly impossible to schedule, or because some members may dominate the discussion to the detriment of the group process’.

2. Discussing the Team’s dynamics and developing team cohesiveness

Some major stressors within team project work are tensions caused by disproportionate efforts and ‘free riding’ by less capable team members. Houldsworth and Mathews (2000:43) discuss terms such as ‘social loafing’ where a team member expects that the others will expend the effort, so they do not bother to expend as much effort as they might and ‘free riding’ where a less able member believes their efforts are dispensable and decides to leave the other members to it. They also suggest that the way a team ‘gels’ together creates a team identity called its cohesiveness and a cohesive team is one that possesses a certain atmosphere of closeness or commonness of purpose. Team norms need to be considered because this specifies certain rules for how team members should behave and thus reflect the mutual expectations amongst team members.

The mentor approached the team dynamics and development of team cohesiveness by systematically addressing each of the following during the inaugural meeting:

- Individual expectations. Discussion of what grades the individual members wanted to aim for, how they preferred to work, their attitudes towards teamwork, what they expected from the mentor etc. The mentor’s learning and process expectations were also shared with the team.
- Who will be the team leader? The team had to commit to choosing – rather than nominating - a team leader and agree to accept that leader’s direction for the duration of the project.

- Conflict resolution processes. Conflict within the team had to be initially addressed between the members concerned and the team leader. If this remained unresolved, the mentor would arbitrate and the members agreed to accept that decision.
- Working together. Processes were proposed by the mentor such as formal note taking by a nominated scribe at meetings to ensure records were kept about who was to do what, by what time etc.

These processes were intended initially to identify the expectations and needs of both the team members and the mentor. From there, some workable processes and commitments are developed to force an initial level of team cohesiveness to enable the project to proceed. Humphreys et.al. (1997:66) suggest that teams need to be enabled to prioritise the workload effectively and to ensure that it is equitably distributed amongst team members. Without this enablement, the teams are likely to face situations outlined by Lerner (1995:1) who comments that ‘unfortunately, the experience is frequently less satisfying for many students who struggle with interpersonal and group dynamics. They have difficulty dealing with troublesome group members and take exception to the notion that they will be better off for having had the experience’.

3. Negotiating the processes for feedback and information sharing

Often team members attempt to subvert the team process by dividing the project into individual parts. This might be done in an attempt to economise on available time or to avoid working with other team members. The outcome of this approach is inconsistent content where the work has actually been done or frequently, highly variable inputs by the individual team members. The mentor addressed this by discussing with the team and getting commitments to processes that enabled feedback and information sharing with three main stakeholders, ie.

- Amongst the team members. For example, this was done by identifying key areas of knowledge, expertise and interests and encouraging that team member to focus on and take responsibility for gathering and sharing this with the team members.
- Between the mentor and team members. Whilst it was not the responsibility of the mentor to conduct literature searches etc. for the team, guidance and assistance with processes, making personal collections available and facilitating introductions to knowledge experts

were practical ways the mentor was able to assist the team and to advance their knowledge and skills.

- With the course leader. The mentor asked questions of the team at each meeting about lecture, tutorial, study package and personal contact content given by the course leader. This was done to ensure there was a clear understanding by the team members and to monitor the process for areas that needed additional input or clarification.

It was not unusual for the relationship between mentor and mentees to intensify at this stage because there was still dependency by the team on the mentor - often based on a perception that the mentor is the 'expert' and 'leader'. The challenge for the mentor was to take the team from this phase to the personal autonomy phase.

4. *Managing the 'Personal Autonomy Phase'*

In each of the mentoring projects carried out over the four-year period, a situation arose when the team reached a stage where they did not consider the mentor's involvement was necessary. This differs to the situation described by Stead's (1997:222) study involving a Business Faculty that found 'in over half the cases surveyed, learner and mentor had made either very limited or no contact with one another...it was found in some case the failure of the relationship to thrive was caused by [mentor] job changes and similar reasons. In others, more positive reasons played a role in that learners were found to be using the services of 'helpers' other than the officially designated mentor. These helpers included fellow students, colleagues, partners and friends'.

The stage at which the teams reached 'personal autonomy' arose when they were well advanced in their research and problem solving. By this stage, they had become the 'experts' and were much closer to the project than the mentor. The commitment to continue meeting on a regular basis (weekly) and to share knowledge and information became arduous for the team members and the source for potential tension with the mentor. It was important at this stage for the mentor to ensure the team did not either dissipate or disintegrate because team cohesiveness was allowed to dissolve. The mentor needed to allow freedom and autonomy for team members to proceed with reduced formal involvement – to be able to discover and internalise their exhilarations, frustrations, errors etc. Without exception, a level of tension and stress built up within the individual team members from trying to balance the intensity of

the project with other demands on their time and at this stage, the mentor was well placed to formalise the team process by reaffirming the mentor/mentee relationship and re-establish the limits.

5. Reaffirming the mentor/mentee relationship and re-establishing the limits

In this phase it was necessary to go back and discuss and reaffirm the ground rules, the team's dynamics, and commitments to feedback and information sharing processes. Often a level of dependency on the mentor re-emerged at this stage. The mentor had to be cognisant of this and ensure they did not subvert the personal and professional growth of team members by assuming the role of team leader. The mentor moved the team towards a situation of collegiality and this was achieved by a facilitative input from the mentor to encourage the team to regather and refocus on completion of the project and attainment of their personal and professional growth outcomes. (These outcomes were expressed through a formal presentation to the client and the course leader).

6. Personal and professional growth outcomes

Because a presentation was involved as part of the formal assessment, the team participated in a trial presentation to the mentor. This collegial approach provided an opportunity for the team to consider the appropriateness of the presentation criteria they had developed and to understand more fully the key attributes of a successful presentation (Humphreys et al. 1997:67). It also provided an opportunity for the mentor to blend with the team because the final presentation was a public display of the collective efforts of both the team and the mentor.

7. Debriefing

At the conclusion of the formal presentation, the team and mentor met. The role of the mentor was important in providing supportive reassurance, feedback and praise of the team efforts and reducing the focus on individual team members. The sharing of the euphoria, relief and sometimes the disappointment as a team enabled a focus on collective rather than individual outcomes.

Within a couple of days of the formal presentation, the mentor facilitated an informal meeting of the team members to debrief the project. This allowed reflective consideration of the

processes, the professional outcomes (in terms of achieving the project objectives and acquisition of professional skills) and the learning outcomes. It was important for the mentor to also contribute to this debriefing by inputting from the perspectives of their mentoring role. This is often ignored and Campbell & Campbell (2000:1) reported from their study that 'while students were more positive than their mentors in assessing the overall value of the mentoring relationship, they were relatively unaware that mentors might enter into the relationship to obtain benefits to the mentors'.

The final aspect of debriefing was formal feedback on the mentor by the team members to the course leader. This feedback was the basis for determining the award of 'Mentor of the Year' as part of a Departmental staff and student celebration of the conclusion of the projects. This also involved a re-presentation by the team that had achieved the highest mark for their client presentation.

OTHER ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Mentor training

The underlying process that was used was similar to that in Schlee's (2000:6) study of business schools which reported that 'most [program administrators] felt that training classes would be an additional burden on their mentors. Mentors are provided with some literature on the mentorship program and are capable of deciding what to do with the student(s) assigned to them'. Schlee (2000:8) also suggests that 'most mentoring programs focused on career development or professional preparation, rather than leadership or character development... very few programs provide training for mentors or evaluate the mentorship experience of mentors and mentees'.

The sequential framework provides a platform from which to develop mentors for student project teams in business schools. It is not possible to generalise whether this framework could be applied to other disciplines.

Compatibility

There is divided opinion about whether a mentor needs to be working in the same field as the learner, thus possessing the same expert knowledge but to a greater extent. The experiences

behind development of the sequential framework presented in this paper support Stead (1997:223), who reports that ‘that formality in the conduct of mentoring is conducive to success, that mentors and learners should work in the same field and that mentors should be trained (in mentoring). Despite their proximity and shared subject expertise, direct supervisors do not make ideal mentors’

The selection of mentors and their matching with mentees is another contentious matter. It is further complicated when mentored teams, rather than individuals, are involved. Chao et al (1992:634 cited in Hale 2000) warned that care must be shown in the matching process in formal mentoring programmes...a current practice of random assignment of protégés to mentors is analogous to blind dates: there would be a small probability that the match would be successful, but more attention to the selection phase would raise the probability above chance levels. Hale (2000:3) goes on to say that ‘despite the recognition of the need to take care when pairing mentor and mentee and the range of approaches taken, it would appear that there is no evidence of a consistently reliable approach...’

Cultural issues

The projects used to develop the sequential framework all involved teams that comprised diverse cultural membership. No specific attempt was made to investigate this phenomenon; however, there were several instances when tensions between team members indicated that the underlying causes might have their origins in cultural considerations.

CONCLUSION

Although no formal evaluation was carried out, informal evaluations tended to support Schlee’s (2000:7) study which reported that ‘the majority of students were satisfied with their mentoring experiences. They believe that mentoring programs allow students a glimpse at life in a business setting. Even though some students develop closer relationships with their mentors than others, most students find that mentoring programs are well worth the effort’.

Arguably, the principles of support and challenge that are addressed by the sequential framework for mentoring student project teams in business schools go some way to

addressing Hawkey's (1997:8) conclusions that 'the emerging picture of mentoring is extremely complex, one in which variation of practice persists. To some extent, such variation is both inevitable and desirable; however, establishing some underlying consistency for mentoring practice is needed'.

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