Mentoring for Post Graduate Students – Need Assessment (Indian Perspective)

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Abstract: Mentoring is “a practice that remains ill defined, poorly conceptualized and weakly theorized, leading to confusion in policy and practice” Colley (2003). Mentoring may be described as a relationship between a less experienced individual, a mentee or protégé, and a more experienced individual known as a mentor.

Several studies have indicated that mentoring is associated with positive behavioral, attitudinal, health-related, relational, motivational, and career outcomes. Not only in organizations, the need for mentorship can be felt early on, while a student transits from school to a postgraduate college/university. Although exciting, this transition may prove to be an overwhelming or daunting experience for many students.

Several educational institutions across the world boost of successful implementation of mentoring programmes. However, despite the increase in mentorship research and practice, sparse data is available to understand the need and existing mentoring programmes at Postgraduate phase colleges, in India. The paper aims to study the need and effectiveness of both formal and informal mentoring programmes in Indian postgraduate colleges and suggest a way forward. In this qualitative study, data about assessing the need for a mentor by postgraduate students is captured and analyzed by conducting Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with two set of management students belonging to different academic years.

Keywords: Formal and Informal Mentoring, Postgraduate students, Mentorship, Mentee, Protégé.

Introduction

Traditional economies had their own versions of mentorship, with the mentors referred to as master craftsmen, and the protégés called apprentices. The modern mentoring has some similarities with the original traditional version, the most striking being that it involves the passing on of skills, knowledge, and wisdom from generation to generation. According to Dr. Tatiana Bachkirova, Co-director of the International Centre for Coaching and Mentoring Studies, Oxford Brookes University, UK - “Coaching and Mentoring is moving to the East, not only for the pragmatic purposes of increasing performance, but also with an interest in contributing to the development of the knowledge base of coaching, linking it to the wisdom of some eastern philosophical traditions.”

With every passing year, mentoring is gaining importance in all types of setup. Many studies conducted worldwide have found that mentoring (both formal and informal) is associated with positive job outcomes, which include higher compensation and rates of promotion (Dreher & Ash, 1990) and also higher job satisfaction (Chao, Waltz & Gardner, 1992).

The increased benefit which a mentoring relationship brings for both the parties (mentor and mentee) in organizations has been replicated in many educational institutions. However, despite the increase in mentorship studies worldwide, in Indian context, little data is available to understand if mentoring in Post graduate colleges exists. Also, the implementation and effectiveness of both mentoring programmes in Indian Post graduate colleges needs to be examined.

Rationale of the Study:

Mentoring is a fundamental form of human development where a person invests his/her time, energy and personal know-how in assisting the growth and ability of another person (Shea, 1997).

In traditional Indian families, even today children are discouraged to challenge the view of elders. This very much continues in school where a teacher’s (Guru) wisdom cannot be challenged. When this child grows in to a young adult there is a lot of anxiety and unrest. Although exciting, this transition from school to college/university may be
relationships. People can rotate in and out of these learners simultaneously, forming broad mentoring with multiple people who work as counselors and organization. Learning connections typically occur from colleagues from anywhere within an organization. By assisting them find, connect, and gather insights to address their personal, real-time learning needs perceived as something which enables employees to develop over time. This characteristic makes mentoring relationships tough to create or grow unless both parties gain some benefit. An effective mentoring relationship begins with a formal and informal mentoring and three organisational intervention is Formal mentoring (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). It is managed and sanctioned by the organization (Chao, Walz, Gardner, 1992). Organizations tie the formal mentoring program to business goals with quantifiable results, and carry out periodic evaluations and coordination offering ongoing support for mentoring pairs. However, an outcome related to mentors which has been virtually unexplored in formal mentoring literature, is psychological health, such as affective well-being. Research in the social, health, and positive psychology domain suggests that helping others increases one’s own positive emotion (Batson, 1991).

While formal mentors are imposed by the organisations, informal mentoring relationship develops naturally and is maintained on a voluntary basis. Informal mentorships are not administered, structured, nor formally recognized by the organization. Traditionally, they are spontaneous relationships that occur devoid of external involvement from the organization. Informal mentoring develops on the foundation of perceived capability and interpersonal comfort (Eby et al., 2007).

With informal mentoring relationships, both the mentor and the protégé carefully observe each other before committing to the mentoring relationship. Here the protégés look for mentors who possess power, have self-confidence, and are willing to share and protect. On the other side, potential mentors usually seek out protégés who have previously established a good performance record, possess a desirable social background, and have established commitment and loyalty (Hunt & Michael, 1983). According to (Delong, Gabarro & Lees, 2009) the notion that a standardized mentoring system will solve one’s problems is an illusion. Rewarding a mentor for engaging in prearranged interactions with subordinate simply doesn’t work.

A study by Viator (2001) examined the association between formal and informal mentoring and three measures of role stress (role conflict, role ambiguity, and apparent environmental uncertainty), as well as two job outcomes (job
performance and turnover intentions). The statistical analysis which was based on structural equation modeling used responses from 794 employees of large public accounting organizations. This particular study revealed that the employees who had an informal mentor experienced lower levels of role ambiguity.

It has been shown that informal mentoring is less likely to lead to negative mentoring experiences and that protégés with informal mentors reap greater benefits than those with formal mentors (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007).

Also, many a times mentors assigned to employees by formal programs may not even interact with the assigned mentees in the same manner as informal mentors. Also, if they have not supervised the individual, they may not possess feedback information that can shed light on the mentee’s role and guide him/her in the role negotiation process (Jackson & Schuler, 1985).

**Mentoring Students**

The transition of students from undergraduate to a postgraduate college can be an overwhelming experience for them. Here a mentor can come to the rescue of students who can make them comfortable in the new environment and help them to perform to their fullest potential.

Campbell, Campbell (2007) in their paper studied, the long term academic effects of mentoring relationships in higher education with particular emphasis on students in ethnic categories with a low first year retention rate. A total of 339 undergraduate students in a student–faculty mentor program was statistically paired with 339 nonmentored students. At the end of the one year of mentoring experience, the students who had been mentored were found to have a higher grade point average (GPA), completed more units, and had a higher retention rate. Eleven years after the onset of this study, it was revealed that by graduation the GPAs of the mentored students did not differ significantly from their counterparts and there were no differences in graduation rate. However, the mentored students were found to remain on campus to pursue graduate study.

Another study by Johnson (2006) revealed that for students, mentoring relationships include the provision of career, social, and emotional support in a safe setting for self-exploration that results in constructive academic and personal outcomes for students. A study conducted by Schlosser and Gelso (2001) brought to light the fact that students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels report that mentoring helped them develop abilities and behaviors necessary to succeed professionally.

Chao, Walz & Gardner (1992) conducted a field study comparing 212 protégés who were engaged in informally developed mentorships, 53 protégés involved in formal mentorship programs, and 284 members who did not have any mentors. The data used in this study were collected as part of a longitudinal study examining the career development of alumni from a large Midwestern university and a small private institute. Alumni were randomly selected from nine graduating classes from each institute to obtain data from a cross-section of individuals who graduated between the years 1956 and 1986. Classes were sampled at 5-year intervals for graduation years prior to 1980. For graduation years after 1980, classes were sampled at 2-year intervals. Individuals in informal and formal mentorships were evaluated along two mentoring dimensions: psychosocial and career-related functions. All groups were compared on three outcome actions: organizational socialization, job satisfaction, and salary. The results of the study indicated that protégés in informal mentorships revealed that they received more career-related support from their mentors and higher salaries than those in formal mentorships.

Bettinger, Baker (2011) in their study introduced coaching, as a form of mentoring for college students. InsideTrack, provider of coaching services that incorporates a combination of methodologies, curricula, and technologies was hired for this purpose. InsideTrack matches students to potential coaches, and these coaches regularly get in touch with their students to provide help and support as they are starting a semester of study and as they continue through their first year in school. Topics such as personal time commitments (work scheduling), primary caregiving responsibilities, and financial obligations were common during a student-coach interaction. Within institutions, InsideTrack randomly divided eligible students into two balanced groups, one who received coaching and the other who did not.

The findings of this study revealed that retention and completion rates were greater in the coached group. This held true for entire duration of time following enrollment. The effects persisted for at least one more year after the coaching had concluded. After 18 months, there was a 4.3 percentage point increase in college retention and after 24 months, there was still a 3.4 percentage point treatment effect from the coaching. These differences are all statistically significant over a 99 percent confidence interval.
According to Thaler & Sunstein (2008) students often need a “nudge” to finish complex tasks. In higher education, it is normally assumed that course requirements provide that nudge or that students are sufficiently self-motivated to not need external stimuli. College graduation rates show that this assumption might not be true; student coaching might be a mechanism to “nudge” students. One of the goals of student coaching is to motivate the students to complete tasks.

Many Post graduate level institutions across the world boost of successful implementation of mentoring programme. Many of such institutions are already reaping the benefits of this relationship. However, despite the increase in mentorship research and practice, sparse data is available to understand the need for mentoring programmes in Indian Postgraduate level colleges. The objective of this qualitative study is to identify the need of this programme for Indian postgraduate level students. Also, an attempt is being made to study as to which mentoring relationship (formal or informal) could prove to be more productive for Indian students at this level. Also, the implementation and effectiveness of mentoring programmes in college need to be examined.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was done by conducting Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with two groups of students - the first year (2nd Semester) and second year (fourth semester) students of a Business Management school. All the participants of this study had volunteered to be a part of this discussion. In all, thirty students were a part of this study, eighteen from first year and twelve from the second year of the Management of Business Administration (M.B.A) course.

The aim of conducting this FGD with two diverse groups was to understand if the need for mentoring was felt more during the first year when the students were still settling down in the new environment and getting accustomed to the new and unfamiliar surroundings. The discussion was video graphed and notes of the conversation were taken down and later analyzed.

FGD (Group 1)

The first group comprised of twelve (12) second year (fourth semester) students undergoing M.B.A course in a Business School. The FGD began with the facilitator (also the author of this study) asking the students about their understanding of who a mentor was. Some participants believed that mentors were like counselors or guide who could help them with better career guidance with their experience. However there were few others who felt that a mentor is more like a role model and should be chosen by the mentee himself/herself.

Participant 10: “As our mentor would be an ideal person …..we can develop a relation and try to learn a lot from them. So in colleges if you see some teacher or even in management and you feel that you want to be like them in future, he can train you, mentor you…”
Participant 6: “Most of us would be joining the corporate world, it is important to get proper guidance at this point …….because if our first step in the corporate world is wrong than it can spoil the career of the individual”
Participant 1: “Mentor mentee relationship is more emotional and psychological. …..If you are given an opportunity to choose a mentor you will choose a mentor you can relate to ….who is your role model.”

Most participants agreed that given a choice they would want to choose their own mentors (informal mentors).

Participant 6: “In my point of view we should select our mentors rather than a imposed mentor……when you select your mentor you can better connect to them……when it is mechanically organized it is not very useful. More productive if person himself selects the mentor”. 
Participant 1: “……To choose a mentor is like choosing a family……not only till the college ends but for lifelong…. I already had a mentor outside college so I was not able to share that much with the formal mentor assigned by the college”.
Participant 6: “Not every professor can be a good mentor. They can get very mechanical and mentor just for the sake of it”.

Also, few of the participants felt that having mentors outside college could be equally fruitful and beneficial.

Participant 6: “We generally believe that mentor has to be some professor or somebody from academics … but they can be anybody from your parents, other family members or friends….also our friends are our best mentors I think because they know us very much. They can bluntly say that you are lagging in this and need to improve on this……”
Participant 7: “Even people younger than you can be your mentor…… Like I have problems in many
areas, if I am confused in any stage my brother helps me to sort it out….for me my younger brother is my mentor”.

Participant 9: “All students are different in personality and qualities. They want a mentor with whom they can feel comfortable.”

When asked about their experiences, if any, of having a mentor (formal or informal) in the college, three of the participants shared that they found the mentors assigned to them by the college in the first year to be helpful. However, after they (faculties) left college, the process broke midway and they were not assigned new mentors. One out of these three participants also pointed out that she could better connect with her mentor only during the one on one discussion between them.

Another interesting perspective that came up during this interaction was that for few students who are shy and do not open up easily, they may actually need a formal mentor allotted by the institute.

Participant 6: “There are people who are very much shy and are not very much communicative. In our college only we have many students who are very bright but just because they are shy they will never approach anyone. Only when college allots a mentor then only they will open up…”

Towards the end the facilitator concluded by asking each one of them to briefly share if they felt that having a mentor in college can help, not only academically but overall.

Participant 1: “Need a mentor who can constantly see to it that I do not lose focus”
Participant 2: “Mentor not very much important for me….advice can be taken from friends also”
Participant 3: “Till now have not felt the need to have a mentor in college. Though we were allotted mentor from college I never felt the need to meet her”
Participant 4: “To get guidance and support in postgraduate college we need to have mentor in college”
Participant 5: “Personally I have not felt the need to have a mentor but I feel for some students they tend to think they are mature and might take some wrong decisions. So for proper advice they may need a mentor.
Participant 6: “If I have selected my mentor only and only then it will be helpful”
Participant 7: “For me mentor is needed”
Participant 8: “Sometimes we might be confused regarding studies or any other problem and we do not get an immediate solution…so for that we need a mentor”
Participant 9: “I feel comfortable only with informal mentor ….so in college I need only informal mentor”
Participant 10: “Need a mentor- could be formal or informal”
Participant 11: “I need an informal mentor in college…I cannot discuss things with anyone”
Participant 12: “We are the best ones to assess ourselves….only we know what we are thinking….so no mentor required”

The discussion concluded with nine out of twelve participants agreeing that they felt a need to have a mentor either for themselves or others in college. Out of these nine students, three of them were very clear that they could do best with informal mentors only.

FGD (Group 2)

The second group comprised of eighteen first year (second semester) students pursing M.B.A course from a Business School. The volunteers of this group were very enthusiastic about being a part of this group and sharing their views on the topic.

The discussion began with the facilitator asking the participants about their idea of a mentor. Majority of the students in this group replied that they felt a mentor was someone who could guide them or advice them regarding academic or personal issues.

When asked about their need to have a mentor in college, this group unanimously agreed that they felt that having a mentor within college would prove beneficial. Another perspective that came out of this group was the need for a same gender mentor.

Participant 10: “For taking leaves we have to go to a male faculty. If a girl has a personal issue she might hesitate approaching a male mentor”.

Next, the facilitator asked students if they felt having an informal mentor vis- a vis a formal mentor inside college would be any different. To this few participants responded by arguing that all students do not bond naturally with all faculties. With a formal mentor their might be certain boundaries within which they interact.

Participant 15: “With informal mentors one can share things without any hesitation”
Participant 8: “Formal mentors are imposed on us by the college, so there might not be mutual understanding between the mentor and mentee.”

As all participants had collectively agreed that a mentor within college would be beneficial, towards the end, the facilitator asked the participants to
conclude by stating which mentor (formal or informal) would be most suitable for them, briefly giving reasons for same.

Participant 1: “Informal mentor would be better as he/she would be better able to understand us”
Participant 2: “Informal mentor because he will be more approachable and we can contact him anytime”
Participant 3: “Informal mentors because students won’t hesitate discussing issues with him”
Participant 4: “Informal mentors because we can discusses personal problems”
Participant 5: “Combination of both. With informal mentor we can openly discuss anything and with formal mentor there is certain respect level which should be there in this relationship”
Participant 6: “Students should be given a choice to choose their mentors”
Participant 7: “Informal mentor from outside college because he can better guide us regarding how to manage time and prepare oneself for the corporate world”
Participant 8: “Formal mentor within college as we may have informal mentors outside college”
Participant 9: “Informal mentors would be helpful however the process of implementation of this programme should be formal”
Participant 10: “Informal mentors within a formal setup of this programme”
Participant 11: “Combination of formal and informal. Formal because it will bring respect in the relationship”
Participant 12: “Formal mentors would be better”
Participant 13: “Combination of both formal and informal mentors”
Participant 14: Left the FGD midway
Participant 15: “If we have informal mentors, output would be better”
Participant 16: “Formal mentors, because students who are shy might not themselves approach people within college”
Participant 17: “Formal mentors because with their proper guidance we can develop different skills”
Participant 18: “Formal mentors because with they can guide us which sector to join”

Hence, although majority (17 out of 18 participants) felt the need for a mentor within college, nine of them believed that informal mentors would be of more help than the formal mentors. Also, five of the students brought a fresh perspective to the study by stating that the choice of a mentor should be informal while the process of implementation of this programme should be formal.

Analysis

Analyzing the responses of both group of FGD, we may infer that

1. Majority of the participants from both groups feel that a mentor is required within college.
2. Nearly half of the students believe that they can do better with an informal mentor.
3. Few participants belonging to the first year (2nd semester) of college believed that although the students should have the liberty to choose their mentor, the process of implementation of this programme should be formalized by the college.
4. The need for a mentor within college was sensed more by the first year post graduate students.

Discussion

Taking cue from the literature review and the FGD, we may claim that at Postgraduate level, a need to have a mentor is felt by majority of the students. Apart from giving students the direction and confidence to meet their personal and academic goals, mentoring could also serve as a means to expose students to skills required to maintain the work life balance.

The present study recognizes the importance of an informal mentoring relationship, where a mentor engages in psychosocial activities like counselling, providing friendship, facilitating social interactions, role modelling.

Talking from Indian perspective even today most students coming from traditional families are not encouraged to share their concerns with everybody. In such circumstances the need for formal mentors who can guide and train their mentees (students) in all matters, professional and otherwise, is felt more. Hence, we may say that at postgraduate level, requirement for mentoring is felt at a more pastoral level.

Also, the faculties need to be trained to mentor students to help them pave the way along the corporate world. On one side it is important that students get to choose their mentor, however it is equally important that colleges ensure that the implementation of this programme is carefully designed and is formalized.
To encash on the benefits of mentoring, many postgraduate level colleges have introduced formal mentoring, however the manner in which it is implemented and the benefits of same still need to be studied. Since, little research has been done in the Indian context, this conceptual paper paves the way for future empirical research to check whether introducing students to a mentoring relationship (formal or informal) would enable them to reap the benefits of this relationship. Also, a detailed study can be done to learn as to which kind of mentoring relationship, formal or informal would be more suitable for them and more importantly what can be done for its effective implementation.

Limitations of the study

The Limitations of this study could be that the chosen sample (thirty students) of this study belongs to the same region (from within and around Gujarat). Since the information collected during the course of the study was based entirely on the responses of the participants, there may be an element of bias in the results. This suggests that a survey-based study of a random sampling of respondents, followed by statistical analysis of data collected, might be necessary to validate the results obtained in this study.

It is obvious that findings could have been more accurate if more students from diverse backgrounds and different cities were involved in this study. However, a total of thirty participants from both FGD’s coming from different backgrounds with different household incomes and dissimilar upbringing may be considered as neutralizing this effect.

References:


