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FORMAL V INFORMAL MENTORING: TIME TO SHIFT THE DEBATE?

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Abstract

Academics and practitioners have been pitted against each other over the relative merits of formal (planned) and informal (unplanned) mentoring. According to the academic studies, formal mentoring delivers far fewer benefits to the mentee than informal. Practitioners – particularly in Europe – maintain that experience does not support that view and, moreover, that uncontrolled informal mentoring can be a highly destructive force that perpetuates inequalities in the workplace.

The resolution to this conflict may lie in a redefinition of the issues and in particular of the context, in which formality and informality are observed.

Introduction

Which works better? Formally organised mentoring, in which an organisation intervenes to create and support relationships? Or informal mentoring, where the organisation, if it is aware of mentoring relationships at all, adopts a laissez-faire attitude, encouraging people to develop spontaneous relationships, but providing no direction or overt support? The evidence is contradictory and has led to heated, largely unproductive debate between practitioners, whose practical experience, supported in some cases by measurement of programme outputs, indicates high value from an interventionist approach; and academics, who present equally convincing data to suggest that formal mentoring delivers very limited benefits to the individual, in comparison to informal relationships. In the former camp are Zey¹, Gray², Stott and Sweeney³, Parsloe⁴ and others, supported by an extensive literature of conference reports and organisational studies.⁵ In the academic camp are Kram⁶, Chao⁷, Ragins and Cotton⁸ and others. Somewhere in the middle lie Gibb⁹ and Megginson and Clutterbuck¹⁰

¹ Zey, MG *The Mentor Connection* Dow Jones Irwin New York 1984

² Gray, MM and Gray W *Planned mentoring: Aiding key transitions in career development* Mentoring International Vol 4 no 3 Summer 1990; Gray, W *Developing a planned mentoring program to facilitate career development* International Journal of Mentoring Spring 1988

³ Stott, A and Sweeney, J *More than a match* People Management, 30 June 1999

⁴ Parsloe, E and Wray, M *Coaching and Mentoring* Kogan Page, London, 2000

⁵ See *Proceedings of the European Mentoring Centre, 1994-2000*, available from EMC, Burnham House, High St Burnham, Bucks SL1 7JZ, UK; Megginson, D and Clutterbuck, D *Mentoring in Action* Kogan Page, London 1997

⁶ Kram, K *Phases of the mentoring relationship*, Academy of Management Journal Vol 26 1983 pp 608-625

⁷ Chao, GT, Walz, PM and Gardner, PD *Formal and informal mentorships: A comparison on mentoring functions and contrast with non-mentored counterparts* Personnel Psychology Vol 45 1992 pp619-636

⁸ Ragins, BR and Cotton, JL *Mentor functions and outcomes: A comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships* Journal of Applied Psychology Vol 84 No 4 1999 pp529-550

⁹ ref...

¹⁰ Megginson, D and Clutterbuck, D *Mentoring in Action*, Kogan Page London 1995

Given the widespread use of formal mentoring programmes, particularly in Europe¹¹ and North America¹², the issue is of particular importance in terms of the effective allocation of human resource budgets.

1. The arguments in favour of formal mentoring

The arguments in favour of formal mentoring can be classified as follows:

1.1 Social inclusion

Providing a structure, it is argued, enables groups, who might otherwise find it difficult to access influence networks, to overcome intrinsic or extrinsic barriers to self-development and career progression.¹³ The most obvious examples here are diversity programmes, aimed at people disadvantaged by virtue of race, gender, disability or some other form of social exclusion. The evidence of many of these programmes is that formal mentoring does deliver both career and psychological benefits. Aer Rianta¹⁴, Proctor and Gamble¹⁵, Volvo¹⁶ and SAS¹⁷ have all achieved measurable and sometimes spectacular outcomes for women, particularly in terms of promotion.

In a community context, Big Brothers and Big Sisters have measured the impact of formal mentoring on young people at risk¹⁸. Among the highlights of their research are that, compared to non-mentored peers, 10-16 year olds with a formal mentor are:

- 46% less likely to begin drug abuse (70% for minorities)
- 27% less likely to begin drinking
- 30% less likely to hit someone
- skipped 80% less schooldays

They also had improved academic performance and attitude, and better relationships with parents and peers.

Informal mentoring, by contrast, is held to perpetuate social exclusion, because powerful figures in the organisation are most likely – left to their own devices – to adopt as mentees (or proteges, the latter term being now almost exclusively North American in usage) people who are from a similar background (perhaps people who remind them of themselves a decade or two earlier)¹⁹ and with whom they can most easily develop rapport. A number of studies indicate that potential mentors respond most favourably to people, whose behaviour is characteristic of groups with high levels of social inclusion²⁰. In other words, you are more likely to find a mentor if you are confident, ambitious, and socially adept.

¹¹ PA Personnel Services, *Management Development and Mentoring: an international Study*, PA Consulting 1986

¹² Burke, RJ and McKeen, CA *Developing formal mentoring programs in organizations* Business Quarterly Vol 53 1989 pp 76-79

¹³ Gray, W *Achieving employment equality and affirmative action through formalized mentoring* Proceedings of the National Conference on Management in the Public Sector, Victoria, British Columbia April 21-23 1986

¹⁴ Clutterbuck, D *Breaking the glass ceiling at Aer Rianta* In Megginson, D and Clutterbuck, D *Mentoring in Action*, Kogan Page, London 1997

¹⁵ Forthcoming case study in Clutterbuck, D Ragins, BR and Matthewman, L *Mentoring for Diversity* Butterworth-Heinemann Oxford 2001

¹⁶ Antal, Ariane Berthoin *Odysseus' Legacy to Management Development*: 1992

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¹⁹ Erikson, FH *Childhood and Society* WW Norton New York 1963; Tsui, A and O'Reilly, CA *Beyond simple demographic effects: The importance of relationship demography in superior-subordinate dyads* Academy of Management Journal Vol 32 1989 pp 402-423

²⁰ Engstrom, M *Personality factors' impact on success in the mentor-protégé relationship* MSc thesis to Norwegian School of Hotel Management 1997/8

1.2 Organisational v individual benefits

Although these are closely related (it is generally regarded as in the interests of the organisation to develop its people), formal mentoring can be argued to promote a more equal balance between the two. Table 1, below, identifies some of the factors most commonly mentioned in both field cases and in the survey literature. Each of the organisational benefits appears to be balanced by a corresponding benefit for the mentee.

Table 1: Organisational and individual benefits sought through formal mentoring

Organisational benefits	Individual benefits (mentee)
Retention	Career development
Performance	Skills development
Best use of talent	Opportunities for learning and gaining experience
Knowledge sharing	Knowledge acquisition
Safety valve	Having a sounding board and/or counsellor

Practitioners also maintain that formal programmes are more likely to provide benefits for the mentor. Training in mentoring skills is likely to be transferable to other (line) relationships and there is some evidence that mentors gain considerable satisfaction and learning from the developmental dialogue. A handful of organisations reward mentors with greater access to more senior management, which is seen as both motivational and career positive. There seems to be little or no study as to whether mentor benefits are greater in formal or informal mentoring; nor any substantive argument as to why there should be any difference between the two.

A related issue here is the mentor's motivation. Erikson indicates that altruism on the part of the mentor is less likely to result in satisfying relationships than intrinsic desire (self-interest). It could equally be argued that informal mentors are more altruistic (because they don't have to do it) than formal.

The quality and quality of the evidence for each of the benefits in Table 1 varies considerably. Taking each issue in turn:

1.2.1 Retention/ career development

Analysis of mentored v non-mentored individuals in SmithKline Beecham's finance division²¹ found that mentored individuals were 13 times less likely to quit than non-mentored. While some of this result may be explained by the possibility that people who elected to become mentees in this voluntary programme had more positive attitudes towards the company and their potential to progress within it, this is unlikely to be a significant factor. In any case, more positive attitudes may be the result of the mentoring relationship rather than a precursor to it. Orpen²², in a study of a two-year formal programme in a medium-sized manufacturing company, found that frequency of interaction with the mentor was strongly related to work motivation and organisational commitment, but weakly related to job performance – a result he ascribes at least in part to the difficulty of measuring the latter accurately.

An issue here for the mentor is where the focus of responsibility lies. If the mentor is primarily and overtly responsible to the organisation, this is likely to produce role conflict and reduce the level of trust and openness in the relationship. If responsibility lies primarily towards the mentee, the mentor may be instrumental in guiding the mentee out of the organisation. This certainly appears to be an issue for women faced with the glass ceiling²³. It may be that this is in the organisation's best interests of the organisation, too, in helping disgruntled employees leave with more positive perceptions of the organisation.

²¹ Browne, S Forthcoming paper to 7th Annual European Mentoring Centre Conference, Cambridge (England) Nov 2000

²² Orpen, C *The effects of formal mentoring on employee work motivation, organizational commitment and job performance*, The Learning Organization, Vol 4 No 2 1997 pp53-60

²³ Clutterbuck, D and Devine, M *Businesswoman* Macmillan, London 1987 pp91-109

1.2.2 Performance v skills development

There is little beyond anecdotal evidence to support the achievement of improved performance through formal mentoring. What there is tends to be contaminated by a lack of role clarity – in particular, a confusion between mentoring and coaching.

Collecting evidence of the mentor's influence on mentee performance is difficult, not least because the mentor – being off-line -- has little or no direct means of assessing improvements in the mentee's work. Indeed, it can be argued that should the mentor be able to make such a direct assessment, he or she is likely to be acting as coach, not as mentor. Given the longer-term perspective of mentoring, as compared with coaching, performance improvement in terms of direct work output may be an unrealistic expectation from the mentoring relationship on the part of the organisation (and one likely to be attributable to a variety of causes). Behavioural and attitudinal change may be more directly attributable and measurable.

As regards skills improvement from the mentee's perspective, it is useful to distinguish between short-term, immediately applicable skills and the broader, more intuitive learning involved in acquiring wisdom. The evidence, both anecdotal and through case study, is considerably stronger for the latter, at least in the context of European mentoring.²⁴

1.2.3 Best use of talent v opportunities to learn

Both of these are difficult to measure, so again, the evidence is mainly anecdotal and circumstantial. The experience of programme reviews with mentors and mentees, however, is that the mentor frequently opens up new horizons for the mentee, helping them to identify and work towards a much wider variety of learning opportunities and career-enhancing experiences than they would have aspired to on their own.

1.2.4 Knowledge sharing v knowledge acquisition

Access to the mentor's greater experience is frequently cited as a driving force behind successful mentoring relationships²⁵ and this is born out by case studies²⁶, especially at senior levels. The potential of knowledge sharing is greater in formal *developmental* mentoring, where the emphasis of the relationship is on building the mentee's insight and self-resourcefulness, rather than formal *US-traditional* mentoring, where the emphasis is upon sponsorship and more direct help and advice giving²⁷. Programme co-ordinators of the former often refer to the mutuality of the learning that takes place from dialogue on developmental themes – mentors often learn as much if not more from the relationship. In a recent questionnaire distributed to 32 co-ordinators of formal mentoring schemes²⁸, 84% reported significant learning by mentors as an outcome. Other benefits to mentors included satisfaction in helping others to grow (88% of respondents), mentors' own career enhancement (28%), improved relationships between mentor and his/her own direct reports (20%) and increased peer recognition/ status (12%). Noe²⁹ also found that mentors gained in comparison with non-mentors in formal schemes, feeling more positive about the organisation and the quality of the people in it.

²⁴ District Audit, Trish Langdon..... Proceedings...

²⁵ Caruso, RE *Mentoring and the business environment: asset or liability?* Dartmouth Aldershot 1992

²⁶ Clutterbuck, D and Megginson, D *Mentoring executives and directors*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford 1999

²⁷ Gibb, S and Megginson, D *Inside corporate mentoring schemes: a new agenda of concerns* Personnel Review Vol 22 No 1 1993 pp40-54

²⁸ Clutterbuck, D *Survey in preparation for a PhD project on the dynamics of mentoring relationships*, Annual Organisational Psychology post-graduate conference, Birkbeck College, University of London 1999

²⁹ Noe, RA *An investigation into the determinants of successful assigned mentoring relationships* Personnel Psychology Vol 41 1988 pp457-79

1.2.5 Safety valve v sounding board

Some companies have introduced mentoring schemes at least partially to help relieve stress at work; others to help bring to the surface employee issues that do not emerge from discussions between line manager and direct report. (An example from my own consulting work in recent years is an international IT facilities company, where the mentors identified the stress caused by an organisational expectation that personal progress and contribution should be measured by how much additional, supervisory responsibility the employee took on. Many employees, however, wanted to enhance their status as technical experts without taking in management responsibilities. In this case, mentors surfaced the issue in a review meeting and raised it with top management.)

Survey data suggest mentees value having an off-line sounding board³⁰ and is generally supported in the case literature. There is no evidence, however, as to whether formal or informal mentors make better sounding boards. It might be expected that other factors would be more significant here: the mentor's general communication and behavioural competence (ie the ability to listen and empathise) and his or her position capability of offering a different perspective, by virtue of wider experience, more senior position in the organisation and so on.

1.3 Learning potential

Field experience³¹ suggests that, left to their own devices, mentees will seek mentors who are either:

- easy for them to get on with
- high-flyers, who may provide a career tow-rope for their mentees.

The former choice, it is argued, leads towards creating relationships where there is too much similarity and comfort to stimulate high levels of challenge and of difference in perspective. Being satisfied with a relationship is not the same as achieving development benefit from it – a distinction that calls into question some of the data in favour of informal mentoring.

Choosing a high flyer as mentor may present some career benefits, but high flyers may not have the time nor the interest in to invest in reflective dialogue. In both cases, it can be argued; the opportunity to learn may be limited.

Formal mentoring, by contrast, is claimed to allow for matching that introduces "more grit to the oyster". The extent, to which this really happens, has not yet to my knowledge been investigated.

An additional, unproven assertion is that formal mentoring is more likely to weed out unsuitable mentors – "toxic mentors"³² or people who have a value set that is regarded in the company as obsolete or dysfunctional. An issue here is who decides what is suitable or unsuitable (is it from the perspective of the senior decision-makers in the organisation or of the mentee?). A counter-argument is that informal mentors tend mostly to be volunteers (even voluntary arrangements in the formal programme may involve subtle pressures and obligations upon mentors to take part.)

Some academic reviews suggest that the range of learning opportunities is more limited within a formal arrangement. O'Neil et al³³ point to a view "that, when organizations develop formal programs, they emphasise sponsorship, with its relative lack of emotional content, rather than

³⁰ Oxford Regional Health Authority *Report of mentoring programme in support of the Top Manager Programme*, Oxford RHA, Oxford 1983; unpublished survey of 50 mentoring pairs by District Audit, London 1997

³¹ Clutterbuck, D *Everyone needs a mentor* Institute of Personnel Development, London 1985 revised 1991

³² Kizilios???? *Take my mentor, please!*, Darling, LAW, *What to do about toxic mentors* The Journal of Nursing Administration, Vol 15 No 5 May 1985 pp43-44

³³ O'Neill, RM, Horton, S and Crosby, FJ *Gender issues in developmental relationships* In *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental relationships within multicultural organizations*, Ed Murrell, AJ, Crosby, FJ and Ely, RJ Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey 1999 p76 and pp3-20

mentorship.”. Kram³⁴ and Struthers³⁵ suggest that white male mentors, in particular, are likely to feel less comfortable about offering emotional support than instrumental help to people of different race or gender, because of a greater perceived risk in doing so. This is, however, a predominantly North American experience and perspective. Most European schemes (and some recent US/ Canadian programmes) pointedly exclude sponsorship behaviours in their design and in the training that establishes the expectations of mentors and mentees. It can be argued in these cases that sponsorship is more likely in informal relationships, where there are no organisational controls to discourage it.

1.4 *Summary of the arguments for and against formal mentoring*

To summarise the arguments for and against formal mentoring, then, there is a variety of evidence that it does deliver results for individuals and organisations, at least in specific cases. At the very least, there must be some positive outcomes occurring for mentors and mentees to continue to meet. But the evidence is patchy and mostly devoid of quantitative support through credible, rigorous studies. There has, for example, been no in-depth study of successful versus unsuccessful mentoring schemes. Nor has there been any significant evaluation of the benefits for other stakeholders, such as mentees’ line managers and the organisation itself. A “balanced scorecard” approach – one that assesses the mentoring relationship in context -- may produce a much different picture of the overall merits and demerits.

The evidence against formal mentoring is equally patchy. Research often simply looks at the issues from a mentee perspective, or occasionally a mentor perspective, but very rarely examines either the dynamic interaction between the two parties in the dyad, or the context, in which the relationship occurs. (An exception is Carter³⁶). The initial hypotheses typically start from a negative expectation of formal arrangements, which may predispose question design to some extent. Moreover, as we shall see below, there are problems of definition and design of instrument.

2. **The arguments in favour of informal mentoring**

From the earliest analytical studies of mentoring, academic observers have been critical of formal mentoring schemes. Kram³⁷ pointedly states: “The risks of a formal mentoring program are high and the benefits have not been clearly demonstrated.” The conclusion from a variety of studies, in particular Chao et al³⁸, Fagenson et al³⁹ and Ragins et al⁴⁰, is that informal mentoring generally delivers more benefits than formal.

The most thorough recent review of the arguments for informal mentoring is arguably that by Ragins and Cotton, already referred to. The review was carried out as part of a study that surveyed people with formal, informal and no mentors. Statistically, their analysis is compelling in its conclusion that “proteges of informal mentors viewed their mentors as more effective and received greater compensation than proteges of formal mentors. Proteges with informal mentors also received more career outcomes than non-mentored individuals, but no significant differences were found between formally mentored and non-mentored individuals.”

She summarises seven major differences between formal and informal approaches to mentoring, all of which have at least prima facie validity.

³⁴ Kram, K *Mentoring at Work: Developmental relationships in organizational life* Scott, Foresman, Glenview, IL 1985 p184

³⁵ Struthers, NJ *Differences in mentoring: A function of gender or organizational rank?* Journal of Social Behavior and Personality Vol 10 1995 pp265-272

³⁶ Carter, S

³⁷ Kram, K *Mentoring at Work: Developmental relationships in organizational life* Scott, Foresman, Glenview, IL 1985 p185

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2.1 Seven key differences

- 2.1.1 Informal mentoring relationships have longer to build psychosocial and career developmental functions than formal relationships. Longer timescales are often needed for significant benefits to occur. Many formal schemes place an arbitrary time limit on the relationships – in particular, new graduate hires are often given a mentor for one or two years. However, fieldwork again suggests that this is only half the picture. Many formal relationships do continue for long periods, often as informal relationships that evolve from the formal. This transition from formal to informal is commonly observed in fieldwork and deserves to be taken into account in the analysis.
- 2.1.2 “Protégés in formal relationships may perceive that their mentors spend time with them because of a commitment to the mentoring programme and the organization, rather than because of personal commitment to the protégé... these factors may restrict the development of trust and emotional closeness...” Fieldwork suggests that this is at least sometimes the case and we have already referred above to some of the dilemmas this may create for the mentor. Much may depend, however, on the benefits the mentor sees for him/herself from the relationship.
- 2.1.3 “Formal relationships are contracted to focus on career goals that are short-term and relate to the protégé’s current position... in contrast, informal mentors are concerned with the long-term needs of their protégés.” Again, the North American case literature would tend to support this view. However, many schemes of mentoring go to great lengths to emphasise that the relationship is *not* about career assistance, but about overall development of the individual.⁴¹
- 2.1.4 “Formal mentors may be less motivated to be in the relationship than informal mentors”. Field experience strongly supports this view, the worst case in my experience being someone who introduced himself to a mentor training session with the words: “I never had any of this soft treatment when I joined the company and I can’t see why these graduates need it now!” Even when a programme is ostensibly voluntary, managers may feel obliged to take part, either to gain approval from their own bosses, or because they are under pressure to demonstrate people development skills.
- 2.1.5 “Formal mentors may have less effective communication and coaching skills than informal mentors.” Field evidence would again tend to support this view, especially when the cadre of potential mentors is small, for example, at top management level, for middle managers. (It is not clear where else mentees can go to find a mentor, except outside the organisation, so scheme coordinators often have to facilitate matches with managers they regard as relatively poor in coaching skills. In some cases, this is done specifically with the intention of developing the *mentor’s* competence in this area.)
- The perception of the mentee is more important here, she suggests, than that of the programme coordinator. Many schemes now allow for a degree of selection by mentees, to ensure that the mentee is comfortable with the mentor’s capability, motivation and interest.
- 2.1.6 Formal programmes often match people across departmental boundaries to avoid favouritism. “This practice may impede the formal mentor’s ability to intervene on the protégé’s behalf and provide exposure, protection, sponsorship and challenging assignment functions.” They may also provide less effective role modelling and career counselling, because they have different interests and career paths. While all these arguments are tenable, there are equally powerful counter-arguments that should be taken into account. Firstly, the purpose of cross-departmental mentoring demands greater recognition. Not only does it provide a wider perspective, it also opens up wider and different networks and adds skills not obtainable within the department. For

⁴¹ Eg Lopez, E Building a *Mentoring culture: The World Bank Experience*- Paper to Linkage Conference on Coaching and Mentoring, London June 2000

example, in a retail organisation, the mentees in the finance function were assigned a choice of mentors according to their development need. Those that needed to become more effective in finance matters received mentors in-department; those that needed a broader commercial understanding received mentors in sales, merchandising or marketing.

Secondly, protection and sponsorship are exactly what organisations (and mentees) often do *not* want. The exercise of mentors' power on behalf of the mentee has many negative as well as positive outcomes. It may create dependency, especially in cross-gender relationships; it may inhibit self-reliance; and it is likely to reduce challenge by the mentee towards the mentor.⁴²

Thirdly, mentors from a different area may be better able to advise on difficult relationships than someone, who already has their own views on the protagonists. They are also more likely to suggest career moves outside the function, or outside the organisation. This view is supported by further research by Ragins et al⁴³, who in a recent study concluded "programs that used mentors in the same department as the protégé had less satisfying mentoring relationships and were marginally associated with more negative job attitudes than programs that used mentors from other departments.

2.1.7 "Because formal mentors are more visible than informal mentors, they may be more self-conscious about engaging in career development behaviours that might be construed as favouritism by others in the organization... they may be less likely than informal mentors to intervene on their protégé's behalf." This illustrates the gulf between traditional North American mentoring and European development-oriented mentoring. For the latter this is a positive argument in favour of formal mentoring.

Most of the evidence from quantitative studies of formal and informal mentoring is gathered from questionnaires built around various combinations of these assumptions. (Orpen, referred to earlier, adopts a more neutral starting point and is not widely referenced in the North American literature.) Chao et al⁴⁴ studied 212 informal mentees and 53 mentees in formal relationships. Using Kram's nine functions of a mentor, they found that informal mentees reported more career development functions and higher salaries than people in formal relationships – but not any greater level of psychosocial functions. Some aspects of organisational socialisation were also more commonly reported among formally mentored than informally mentored respondents. Fagenson-Eland et al⁴⁵, in a smaller study, found more psychosocial benefits for informal mentees and no significant difference in career development functions.

Ragins and Cotton followed a similar approach, again based on Kram's nine functions (with the addition of two more, parent and social) but identified mentees by targeting people in three professions, using mailing lists provided by professional associations. They found that informal mentees received more career development and more psychosocial functions than people in formal relationships and were more generally satisfied with their mentors. Specifically, informal mentees received, under the heading of career functions, greater sponsoring, coaching, protection, challenging assignments and exposure. Under psychosocial benefits they received more friendship, role modelling, and acceptance. They did not, however, receive more in terms of the parenting or counselling functions.

⁴² Scandura, TA *Dysfunctional mentoring relationships and outcomes* Journal of Management vol 24 1998 pp 449-467

⁴³ Ragins, BR, Cotton, JL and Miller, JS *Marginal mentoring: The effects of type of mentor, quality of relationship and program design on work and career attitudes* Academy of Management Journal (in press)

⁴⁴ Chao, GT, Walz, PM and Gardner, PD *Formal and informal mentorships: A comparison on mentoring functions and contrast with non-mentored counterparts* Personnel Psychology Vol 45 1992 pp 619-636

⁴⁵ Fagenson-Eland, EA, Marks, MA and Amendola *Perceptions of mentoring relationships* Journal of Vocational Behaviour Vol 51 1997 pp 29-42

2.2 *The quantitative research approach*

There are a number of potential difficulties with quantitative approaches of this kind, however.

Firstly, it is difficult to ensure a level playing ground for comparisons. Ragins et al's most recent study draws attention to the issue of variations in the quality of the relationship. Informal relationships, as well as formal, may vary from highly satisfying through marginally satisfying to dissatisfying. (A strength of informal mentoring may therefore be that it is easier to withdraw than in formal relationships.) "Existing studies may have masked this effect by combining individuals with satisfying and dissatisfying relationships and comparing this group to those with no mentoring relationships. It may be possible that ... findings of significant differences between informally mentored and non-mentored individuals reflect group averages skewed by highly satisfying relationships."

The same argument may be used in reverse with regard to formal relationships. If formal relationships are more difficult to get out of, it is likely that studies may be skewed by the effect of relationships, which, were they informal, would not have got off the ground or would have withered away quickly. Measuring formal mentoring on the total population of attempts to form relationships – both successful and unsuccessful – and informal on those that have succeeded provides a relatively poor basis for comparison. One way of tackling this would be to compare both formal and informal relationships in three categories:

- successful, well-established
- unsuccessful
- still-born

The question "How many frogs did you have to kiss first?" is relevant here – no attempt has been made, to my knowledge, to measure the proportion of failed attempts vis-à-vis successful ones in either formal or informal mentoring.

Sampling issues also arise around the organisational context. Organisations, which have a positive development climate and are generally supportive of employees, may provide more fertile soil for formal mentoring than those, which are less supportive. The latter may be more fertile ground for informal mentoring. The more sources of advice and support available to employees within an organisation, the less, it can be surmised, the less the mentee will need to seek from their mentor. Ragins has suggested in correspondence that there is therefore a need to conduct research that compares formal and informal mentoring *in the same organisation*. Establishing a pattern within a sample of organisations with differing levels of supportiveness would help to clarify the comparison between formal and informal.

Secondly, there are considerable problems with definition. In particular:

2.2.1 *What is formal and what is informal?*

If, for example, a relationship formed as the result of an introduction by a supervisor or Human Resources professional, is that formal or informal? Recognised good practice in Europe is "guide choice" – where the programme co-ordinator helps the mentee select likely candidate mentors and the mentee takes responsibility for deciding whether or not to pursue a relationship with any of them, after one or two initial meetings.

In practice, formality and informality form a spectrum. Tables 2 and 3 show two ways of looking at a spectrum of formality and informality. In practice, the design of mentoring schemes shows a wide variety, which can combine aspects of formality and informality.

SPECTRUM OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Organisation selects/pairs mentees and mentor	Mentee selects mentee with help from HR	Mentee selects mentor (with help from HR) from a panel of well-trained mentors	FORMAL
Organisation develops and trains pool of mentors and encourages relationships to happen	Mentor makes interest known to mentee	Mentee informs HR of selection; approaches mentor	SEMI-FORMAL
Organisation tolerates <i>ad hoc</i> mentoring	Mentor "adopts" mentee. Gradual evolution of relationship	Mentee makes interest known to mentor. Gradual evolution of relationship	INFORMAL
Control by organisation	Control by mentor	Control by mentee	

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FORMAL v INFORMAL MENTORING THE SPECTRUM OF CONTROL

Measurement	For programme review	For benefit of programme & individuals	For benefit of mentor & mentee	No measurement
Recording	Activity logs open to HR	Activity logs kept by mentor/mentee	Activity logs used as discussion triggers	No activity logs
Agenda	Format, agreed in advance	Format, agreed on the spot	Informal, agreed on the spot	No agenda, random discussion
Programme management	Official scheme coordinator	Organised peer support group	Ad hoc support for mentors & mentees	No support for mentors or mentees

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The relationship itself may also vary in level of formality. A highly successful informal mentor operating in an external capacity receives regular weekly reports from each of his executive mentees, for example⁴⁶. In a field experiment (Oxford Regional Health Authority, above) I encouraged each mentoring pair to make use of checklists, review proformas and so on, as much or as little as they wished. In later evaluation, it transpired that each pair established the level of formality, with which they could both feel most comfortable.

Ragins et al's most recent study explores some of the factors that constitute different levels of formality – in particular, whether participation is voluntary or mandatory, whether there is participation in matching and whether the organisation offers guidance on frequency of meetings – and on the effectiveness of the programme itself. They found that “satisfaction with the mentoring relationship had a stronger impact on [work and career] attitudes than the presence of a mentor, whether the relationship was formal or informal, or the design of the mentoring programme”.

2.2.2 *What is a mentor?*

Much of the general literature is invalidated in whole or part by a failure to distinguish between in-line and off-line relationships. The dynamics of these are substantially different, in terms of power (expressed and innate), the ability to provide feedback by direct observation and the degree of influence on the nature of assignments given to the employee. To provide a valid comparison of formal and informal mentoring, it is necessary to unbundled in-line and off-line relationships.

2.2.3 *What does a mentor do?*

The spectrum of mentor roles or functions described in the literature is wide. Within a given situation or programme, however, it is likely to be much narrower. Moreover, there are major differences in definition of mentoring between Europe and North America. Of the five career development functions described by Cram, only one (coaching) is recognised as appropriate in European (developmental) mentoring. Indeed, mentors are actively discouraged from acting as sponsors within an organisational context. (In recent years, some North American practitioners have adopted a similar view.) Crosby⁴⁷ defines three distinct roles: role model, sponsor and mentor.

Kram's functions (also referred to as roles) have become a widely used benchmark that underpins much of subsequent mentoring research. They are, however, definition dependent – i.e. they can only validly be used to measure mentoring relationships of a specific genre. As more and more organisations adopt development-focused mentoring approaches, Kram's functions can be expected to decrease in utility. The basic division of functions between career and psychosocial still seems to be relevant, however, whatever the mentoring context.

2.3 *Outcome measurement*

The definition of a successful relationship also poses some problems. Most studies seek to measure relationship success on the basis of either Kram's functions (a mixture of roles and behaviours, which are not strictly outputs at all) or on career performance (ie promotions, comparative salary levels, which are outputs). They do not measure against development goals, which are the core objective of most mentoring schemes, at least in the European context. Nor do they track specific goals, for which an individual entered a mentoring relationship, against the achievement of that goal.

In theory, at least, formal mentoring relationships should have greater clarity both of role and goal and should therefore result in more frequent goal attainment. Current research by one of the authors aims to test this hypothesis.

⁴⁶ Richard Field, case study in Clutterbuck, D and Megginson, D *Mentoring Executives and Directors* Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 1999

⁴⁷ Crosby, FJ *The development literature on developmental relationships* In Murrell, AJ, Crosby, FJ and Ely, RJ (Eds) *Mentoring dilemmas: Developmental relationships within multicultural organizations* Lawrence Erlbaum Ass. New Jersey 1999

An alternative categorisation of outcomes of mentoring is needed; ideally one that takes into account a wider spectrum of mentoring definitions and circumstances. Analysing the extensive literature on benefits leads to the conclusion that there are four broad categories:

- Development outcomes, which may include knowledge, technical competence and behavioural competence and may lead to specific work results
- Career outcomes, which may include the achievement (in part or whole) of career goals
- Enabling outcomes, such as having a career plan, a (self)-development plan, a wider network of influencers or learning resources
- Emotional outcomes – less tangible, but often powerful changes in emotional state, including increased confidence, altruistic satisfaction, reflective space, status and the pleasure of a different kind of intellectual challenge.

As a means of measuring outcomes, these categories provide at least a starting point for broad comparisons between formal and informal mentoring. Kram's functions are too narrow for the range and diversity of mentoring now carried out. Moreover, it is difficult to make a case for comparing success of different approaches to mentoring, based on a mixture of input and output measures. An output only set of measures is much more credible. It now remains to refine these categories and test them within a framework that accurately differentiates between different approaches.

2.3 Summary of the arguments for and against informal mentoring

In summary, then, the argument for informal mentoring is contradictory and undermined by doubts about the underlying assumptions and definitions. That said, the research itself cannot just be dismissed. At the minimum, it leads to the conclusion that formal mentoring programmes need to reflect and absorb many of the characteristics of informal mentoring if they are to be effective.

3. Alternative perspectives

How to resolve this complex conflict of research data and practical experience? Gibb⁴⁸, in an attempt to analyse the differences between formal and informal mentoring, recommends an emphasis instead on diversity of approach. In this regard, both the European model and the traditional North American model of mentoring can be seen as limiting. A more holistic model, which allows for a wide variety of interpretations and behaviours, provides organisations and individuals with greater choice. However, it also makes it more difficult to conduct research, because both the definition and the context of mentoring must be defined more closely in sampling and making quantitative comparisons.

From a behavioural perspective, it is possible to define what a particular organisation or scheme means by mentoring, by mapping it onto a set of descriptive dimensions. Over the past decade, many organisations in Europe and Asia-Pacific have followed this approach, based on the two dimensions of directive/ non-directive behaviour and intellectual/ emotional need. (The latter variously expressed as stretching versus nurturing, or challenging versus supporting.) Support for these as valid measures of a developmental relationship is strong within the general psychological and counselling literature, as well as the mentoring literature.⁴⁹

Ragins, too, offers a partial but pragmatic resolution of the conflict: "Formal mentoring should not be considered as a substitute for informal mentoring relationships, but should be offered in partnership with informal relationships. Formal mentors are probably at their most effective when they approximate informal mentors in as many ways as possible." How, though, is it possible to achieve this synthesis?

⁴⁸ Gibb, S *The liberation of mentoring: A conceptual framework for reading diversity in formal, organised mentoring*

⁴⁹ eg Barham, K and Conway, C *Developing people and business internationally – a mentoring approach* Ashridge Research, Berkhamstead, 1998

One approach is to recognise that effective behaviours – both as mentor and as mentee – have to be learned. Field experience suggests that left to their own devices, mentors will often revert to a role as surrogate manager or sponsorship. They may spend far too much time offering advice and far too little helping the mentee develop their own understanding. They may focus more on imparting knowledge than growing wisdom. Mentees, too, often fail to get the most out of the relationship because they do not have the skills to do so. Ragins and others identify that people who have multiple mentors achieve more in career terms (both position and compensation). Although there is no clear evidence that greater experience in the role(s) leads to more satisfactory outcomes, this is at the very least a valid hypothesis. Certainly, Ragins and Cotton found no statistical difference between people with a history of formal mentors on number of promotions, compared with people with formal mentors.

Hence, organisationally recognised mentoring relationships, within a formal scheme, may provide a substantial basis, upon which to build informal mentoring relationships. They can provide a context, grounding and relatively safe practice ground for developing a network of helping and learning resources. (It is worth noting here that in every field study I have conducted to review a specific programme, the majority of mentees have expressed a willingness to become mentors in their turn.) A number of organisations have as the ultimate goal of their mentoring scheme a learning environment where the majority of mentoring relationships are informal, with formal relationships reserved for new recruits and people going through particularly difficult transitions.

As we have seen, the labels formal and informal are clearly confusing and unhelpful, when mentoring schemes may fall anywhere on a spectrum between these descriptors. Moreover, formality is not the same as structure. Structures can be formal or informal, but they provide a framework, within which a range of approaches to mentoring is possible. Table 3 suggests a model, which incorporates this distinction.

Table 3 Relationship style v context

RELATIONSHIP STYLE	
<i>Hands-on directive</i>	<i>Hands-off responsive</i>
<i>Structured</i> CONTEXT supervisory mentoring	enabling mentoring
sponsorship	peer mentoring
<i>Unstructured</i>	

In general, structured hands-on help will tend to occur within the line, where it is easier to focus on skills and performance issues. Sponsoring behaviours may flourish best in an unstructured environment, where the mentors' influence can be exercised less overtly. Peer mentoring is unstructured, largely without power implications and heavily under-researched.

Enabling mentoring encompasses the European model with its emphasis on developing self-resourcefulness and empowering the mentee to achieve by their own efforts; it is more descriptive of the psychosocial functions of Kram's model. The career functions from Kram's model appear to fit more easily into the left-hand boxes of the framework.

From the point of view of research, this kind of framework holds out greater possibility of comparing like with like. In theory, at least, understanding the purpose(s) of the relationship and agreeing the style should lead to more effective developmental relationships in each of the four boxes. Once again, this is a hypothesis that remains to be tested.

4. Implications for research

A radical overhaul of research methodology in mentoring is long overdue. Recognition that mentoring involves a variety of relationship types and desired outcomes is a useful starting point.

The nature and focus on mentoring in the field has evolved radically in the past two decades, especially in Europe, but quantitative researchers on both sides of the Atlantic have been slow in recognising that evolution. In part, this may be to do with an over-reliance on previous literature; and also in part to a reluctance by many academics to become closely engaged in practical application. (It is matched by an equal reluctance of practitioners to engage with the theory and conceptual dynamics of mentoring at a dyad/ organisational psychological level.)

A new perspective opens up numerous opportunities for original and useful further study. There is a need, for example, to investigate how appropriate various styles of mentoring are to specific situations/ mentee needs. Behaviour by both mentor and mentee could be observed to understand how the dynamic interaction influences relationship outcomes. (We are currently undertaking a longitudinal research study, which tracks mentor and mentee expectations against behaviours and outcomes over 12-18 months. Some additional areas of potential for study are listed below:

4.1 Some key questions for future mentoring research

- Does formal mentoring lead to more informal mentoring relationships and more satisfactory informal mentoring?
- What are the characteristics that distinguish successful from unsuccessful structured mentoring schemes?
- Mentor benefits – do mentors (formal or informal) gain more from some mentoring situations than others?
- Are there better ways of measuring outcomes for mentors and mentees? (Particularly with regard to specific, individual goals.)
- Are some styles of mentoring/ developmental help more effective than others and in what contexts?

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