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From the ordinary to the extraordinary: High-quality mentoring relationships at work[☆]



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The mantras that “Everyone who makes it has a mentor,” “Good managers are good mentors,” and “Mentor for excellence!” permeate the workplace. Mentoring relationships are expected to deliver exceptional outcomes that develop employees, improve their performance, and propel their careers. However, like other relationships, mentoring relationships fall along a continuum, with the majority reflecting average quality. Yet average relationships are unlikely to produce the exceptional performance and personal growth outcomes that are often expected by organizations and employees.

Extraordinary outcomes require extraordinary relationships, so how do we move mentoring from the ordinary to the extraordinary? Although mentoring scholars have produced volumes of research over the past 30 years, most of this research, and what we know about mentoring, is based on average quality relationships. Our traditional models of mentoring, which have guided practitioners and researchers over the years, explain the most common mentoring experiences, but fail to capture the remarkable experiences and unique dynamics of high-quality relationships. This narrow perspective restricts our ability to understand and achieve the best mentoring has to offer. Mentoring can be one of the most fulfilling and transformative relationships we experience at work, but we need to broaden our lens to find the path to these high-quality relationships.

Relational mentoring illuminates the path for creating high-quality mentoring relationships at work. Emerging from the positive organizational scholarship and positive relationships at work literatures, relational mentoring is a theory

that focuses on the high end of the quality continuum and explains the antecedents, processes, and behaviors of high-quality mentoring relationships. High-quality mentoring relationships are close relationships characterized by trust, disclosure, vulnerability, and commitment. These relationships offer exceptional opportunities for personal learning, growth and discovery for both mentors and protégés. By illuminating the dynamics in high-quality mentoring, relational mentoring helps us visualize and ultimately move our mentoring relationships from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Relational mentoring takes us well beyond traditional approaches that cast mentors as coaches, advisors, or teachers. In high-quality mentoring relationships, both members are transformed and changed in ways that reflect an entirely different set of psychological processes, norms, and behaviors. As we will discover, high-quality mentoring relationships also offer more than just instrumental outcomes relating to advancement or promotion. They provide safe havens that accept us for who we are, giving us the freedom to find our best and authentic selves. Their reach extends well beyond the workplace, as they can give us the courage to forge new career paths and identities. As we will see, they also offer important and unique benefits for a diverse workforce and afford opportunities to learn about diversity within and outside the workplace.

Here is the roadmap for this article. We’ll start by looking at some foundational definitions of mentoring and high-quality relationships at work. Then we’ll compare traditional and relational approaches to mentoring and examine the assumptions that can prevent us from achieving high-quality mentoring relationships at work. We’ll go on to explore how high-quality mentoring relationships develop. We’ll consider their unique dynamics and outcomes, and the important benefits for those in diverse relationships. We’ll gain insights on how to create high-quality mentoring relationships and strategies for improving the quality of our own mentoring relationships.

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We'll conclude with some practical tips for organizations that seek to promote high-quality mentoring relationships at work.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: DEFINING MENTORING AND HIGH-QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK

What are mentoring relationships? Traditionally, mentoring is defined as a relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping and developing the protégé's career. Mentors and protégés may or may not be in supervisory relationships or even employed at the same organization. Some mentoring relationships develop informally, while others are assigned as part of a formal mentoring program. Mentoring relationships exist within a constellation of relationships that can include formal mentors, informal mentors, supervisory mentors, peer mentors and other developmental relationships within and outside the workplace.

A distinguishing feature of mentoring relationships is their focus on learning and development within the career context. Because mentoring relationships involve a more experienced mentor paired with a less experienced protégé, they are traditionally viewed as hierarchical relationships where one person has more influence over the other. However, differences in work experience do not necessarily mean that the relationship has to be a one-way learning experience. As described later, mentoring relationships can involve mutual learning and development, and this mutuality can be a key determinant of high-quality relationships.

What are high-quality relationships? Like diamonds, relationships are multifaceted with multiple indicators of quality. Relational quality can reflect behaviors, processes, norms, affective experiences, and outcomes of the relationship. Most relationship scholars agree that high-quality relationships involve mutual experiences of closeness, connection, trust, responsiveness, and vulnerability, and that people in high-quality relationships usually report being satisfied with their relationship. Members often experience a strong sense of emotional attachment, both to each other and their relationship. Harry Reis and colleagues note that these close relationships involve *partner responsiveness*, which is the experience of being understood, valued, cared for, and supported by one's relational partner. Focusing on workplace interactions, Jane Dutton and Emily Heaphy explain that high-quality connections are resilient to strain, and are characterized by experiences of vitality, positive energy, openness to new ideas, and the ability to express both positive and negative emotions in the relationship. Bill Kahn goes on to explain that high-quality work relationships involve the ability to give and receive care, particularly in times of stress. High-quality relationships offer safe spaces that accept and validate members' experiences, while providing them with enabling perspectives that help them make sense of confusing or upsetting experiences at work.

A key characteristic of high-quality relationships is that they meet the needs of their members. As pointed out by Bill Kahn and other scholars, high-quality work relationships reflect a high level of *needs-based fit*, which is the extent to which the relationship is able to meet the personal, career,

and developmental needs of its members. These scholars point out that relationships are also unlikely to last unless they meet the needs of their members.

Integrating these perspectives, high-quality mentoring relationships can be defined as a mutually beneficial relationship that meets members' needs while providing experiences of relational closeness (i.e., care, concern, responsiveness, vulnerability, emotional connection and commitment). Meeting needs and experiences of relational closeness are closely connected. People are more likely to express their needs in close relationships, and, as we discover later, close relationships are more likely to have norms that fill their members' needs. It's important to remember that needs are not static, but change as people grow and develop. Needs also emerge in response to changing demands within and outside the workplace. As we see next, changing needs place new demands and potential strains on mentoring relationships that can create transitions in relational quality.

UNDERSTANDING HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO MENTORING

Relational States and the Quality Continuum

Mentoring relationships vary in quality. At their best, they can be transformative relationships that enrich our lives and enliven our careers. At their worst, they can be dysfunctional relationships that are toxic and destructive. The quality of the relationship is not static, but shifts as the relationship evolves. As described by Belle Ragins and Amy Verbos, people in mentoring relationships can experience three *relational states* that reflect high (relational), medium (traditional) and low (dysfunctional) levels of quality. As illustrated in Fig. 1, these relational states fall along a continuum of quality, with most relationships falling in the middle, reflecting relational states of average quality. High-quality relational states yield experiences of close mentoring bonds, which reflect strong emotional attachment, as well as high levels of mutual learning, growth, generativity, and empowerment. As described later, traditional or average relationships differ not only in the level of these experiences, but also in the norms, processes, and behaviors exhibited in the relationship. Although this article focuses on high-quality mentoring relationships, it should be noted that some mentoring relationships experience dysfunctional states, which involve exploitation, jealousy, and other negative processes. Fortunately, dysfunctional states occur relatively infrequently in mentoring relationships.

Like other types of relationships, mentoring relationships are dynamic and can transition across this continuum of quality. For instance, relationships may shift from average to high-quality, or may backslide to average or even dysfunctional states. Shifts in quality may be driven by changes in the dynamics of the relationship, the behaviors displayed in the relationship, or the demands and resources experienced by its members. For example, broken trust, increased job demands, and non-work shocks may create more stress on the relationship than it can handle, moving it toward a negative state of quality. As we will see, relationships can also move toward positive states of quality through experiences that build trust and commitment in the relationship.

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