



Antecedents and outcomes of career plateaus: The roles of mentoring others and proactive personality



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ABSTRACT

Although mentoring others and career plateaus are both common experiences for seasoned employees, they are rarely examined together. In this study, we considered mentoring others as an antecedent of career plateaus and emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions as outcomes of career plateaus for mentors. We also examined the moderating role of mentors' proactive personality. Results of hierarchical regression analyses based on 188 mentoring dyads indicated that career-focused mentoring alleviated both hierarchical and job content plateauing perceptions. Mentors' proactive personality moderated the relationship between career-focused mentoring and hierarchical plateauing such that the negative relationship is stronger for low proactive personality mentors. Hierarchical plateaus were positively related to mentors' emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions whereas job content plateaus only positively related to turnover intentions. Proactive personality moderated the relationship between job content plateaus and mentors' work-related attitudes such that the positive relationships were stronger for more proactive mentors. The implications and future research suggestions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring others and career plateaus are important research topics for seasoned employees in the career management literature (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010; Lentz & Allen, 2009). Mentoring literature suggests that mentors can benefit from mentorship by increasing job performance, developing leadership skills, and achieving higher career success (Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). On the other hand, the career plateau literature suggests that seasoned employees may experience career plateauing perceptions, which are associated with negative consequences for employees such as negative job attitudes and organizational outcomes (Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). Surprisingly, there have been very few studies that examine the two constructs together from the perspective of mentors (Allen, 2007; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000).

Seasoned employees are valuable human resources in any organization because they have more experience and expertise and are critical agents for transferring and creating organizational knowledge (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). To better understand the work attitudes and behaviors of seasoned employees, researchers need to consider both positive and negative career experiences that these employees encounter. Furthermore, by examining the relationship between mentoring others and career plateauing perceptions of seasoned employees, researchers can provide insights for theoretical development in the careers literature and also allow for better design of human resources management practices to retain seasoned employees.

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Mentoring others is associated with leadership development activities and enlarging job scope, which can reduce perceptions of career progress uncertainty and job monotony (Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). This suggests that mentoring others may alleviate the experience of career plateaus, which refers to low perceptions of future upward mobility or monotony in job responsibility (Fence, Stoner, & Warren, 1977; Greenhaus et al., 2010; Milliman, 1992). Since most mentoring studies focus on outcomes of junior employees (i.e., protégés) and most career plateau studies focus on the reactions of seasoned employees (i.e., mentors), research bridging the relationship between mentoring and career plateaus has mostly been conceptual discussion or a call for further research efforts (Chao, 1990; Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). The few available studies that attempted to integrate mentoring others and career plateaus offer little empirical evidence on the direct relationships between these two constructs (Chao, 1990; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). Chao (1990) first suggested that mentoring may be a useful organizational intervention to lessen the perceptions of career plateau. However, her study did not empirically examine mentoring others as a predictor of career plateau perceptions. Rotondo and Perrewé (2000) further indicated that mentoring others is a coping response to career plateauing that might help plateaued employees to cognitively manipulate the meaning of being career-plateaued. They empirically examined this premise and measured mentoring others with one item, which asked plateaued individuals to indicate the extent to which they had engaged in mentoring others during their organizational tenure. As a result, mentoring others in their study may not properly reflect the effort individuals put into mentoring others, overlooks the role of mentoring others in other conditions such as formal mentoring, and does not distinguish the role of career mentoring and psychosocial mentoring in career plateauing. Lentz and Allen (2009) integrated mentoring others and career plateauing by considering provision of mentoring functions as moderators between career plateauing perceptions and job attitudes. However, they used self-reported data and only involved mentors of informal mentoring relationships. As a result, their study did not examine the direct relationship between mentoring others and career plateauing and excluded mentors of formal mentorship.

To advance the integration of mentoring others and career plateauing in the career literature, this study identifies potential antecedents, outcomes, and moderators of mentors' career plateauing. In contrast to Lentz and Allen's (2009) application of life stage theory, we take the perspective of conservation of resources (COR) theory in stress (Hobfoll, 1989) to suggest that mentoring others is a resource investment for mentors attempting to prevent a loss of resources that would directly lead to career plateauing perceptions. Thus, mentoring others negatively relates to career plateaus, which are positively associated with emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Because certain personal characteristics are also critical resources (Hobfoll, 1989), we examine the moderating roles of proactive personality in the above relationships. The present study also includes mentor and protégé data among mentors engaged in both formal and informal mentoring relationships to examine the level of mentoring functions provided.

2. Mentoring functions as an antecedent that prevents career plateaus

Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory highlights the important role of resources to individuals such that people strive to obtain and protect resources. Resources are objects (e.g., equipment), conditions (e.g., position and supportive social network), or personal and energy resources that possess intrinsic or instrumental value (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory maintains that stress will occur in the workplace when employees' resources are lost or threatened with loss. The symbolic value of these resources helps employees define who they are (Hobfoll, 1989). Some resources identified by Hobfoll are particularly relevant to the workplace, such as feelings of success, goal accomplishment, challenge, seniority or status, leadership roles, advancement in training, understanding supervisors, and a sense of direction in life. Those resources are related to career advancement and job monotony, and when lost or threatened with loss, may lead to career plateauing perceptions.

Scholars distinguished two types of career plateaus. Hierarchical plateaus occur when the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is low (Feldman & Weitz, 1988; Fence et al., 1977). Job content plateaus refer to lack of challenge or responsibility and overall staleness of the job itself (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998; Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999; Milliman, 1992). Employees who are not accomplishing career goals or lack status/seniority at work may believe their careers are stalling and experience hierarchical plateaus (Feldman & Weitz, 1988; Fence et al., 1977). Likewise, employees with unchallenging job tasks or boring routines may experience job content plateaus (Allen et al., 1998, 1999; Milliman, 1992). Taking the perspective of COR theory, the actual or expected resource loss associated with experiencing career plateaus is stressful and leads to actions to protect or regain resources through investment (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). Because mentoring others provides mentors the opportunities for career advancement and broadened job content, we argue that mentoring others is one type of investment that mentors can use to prevent career plateaus.

The mentoring relationship can be defined as an interpersonal exchange in the workplace between a junior and a senior employee, in which the senior employee (mentor) supports, guides, and orients the junior employee (protégé) to the various tasks, functions, and culture within the organization (Kram, 1983). Much of this research focuses on the benefits for protégés, but more recent research streams have turned to discuss the benefits for mentors (Allen, 2007). However, the potential role that mentoring others has in alleviating career plateauing has rarely been examined. Using self-reported data by mentors, Lentz and Allen (2009) tested the moderating role of mentoring others in the relationship between mentors' career plateau perceptions and their job attitudes, but none of the moderating effects were supported in their study.

From the perspective of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001), mentoring others is a resource investment that might prevent mentor employees' from experiencing career plateau perceptions, either by rejuvenating the mentor in order to restore resources that have been lost or by restoring a mentor's sense of identity that is affected when facing career stagnation. Mentoring others is associated with more positive attitudes and higher perceived performance among plateaued employees (Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). It can also increase emotional attachment and mental energy, reinforce one's professional identity, and improve

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