Protégé--Mentor Agreement about the Provision of Psychosocial Support: The Mentoring Relationship, Personality, and Workload

Dr Lea Waters
Department of Management
Faculty of Economics and Commerce, The University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria 3052, Australia
Email: l.waters@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT: Protégé-mentor agreement (PMA) about the provision of psychosocial support was examined in relation to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work self-esteem. One-hundred and sixty-six junior administrative and information technology (IT) staff at an Australian university and their matched mentors completed a questionnaire that assessed three antecedents to PMA: 1) structural and experience aspects of the mentorship (type and length of relationship, frequency of meetings, previous experience with mentoring, and gender-mix), 2) protégé and mentor personality (agreeableness, openness, extroversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness), and 3) protégé and mentor workload. Structural Equation Modeling using Partial Least Squares revealed that PMA was predicted by structural and experience aspects of the mentorship (type of mentorship, frequency of meetings, experience of the mentor), protégé personality (agreeableness, openness, extroversion and conscientiousness), mentor personality (agreeableness, openness, and extroversion) and mentor workload. Protégé-mentor agreement was related positively to job satisfaction and organizational commitment for protégés and mentors.

Key words: mentoring, psychosocial support, personality, workload, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Background

Protégé-mentor agreement is defined in this paper as the degree to which protégés and mentors hold a shared view of the mentorship. Protégés and mentors who hold a shared view of the relationship may be more likely to understand the needs of the other, be more open to receiving and understanding feedback from the other, and be more likely to make the attitudinal and behavioral adjustments required to ensure a continued relationship (Baird & Kram, 1983; Godshalk & Sosik, 2000; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997). Kram and Bragar (1992) stated that high-quality psychosocial support is only achieved when understanding between the protégé and the mentor is reached. Following this claim, the current study will examine PMA with respect to the provision of psychosocial support which comes through role modeling, counseling, friendship, and conveying positive regard/acceptance towards the protégé (Kram, 1985a; Noe, 1988).
Most investigations of psychosocial support have used ratings given only by the protégé (e.g., Koberg et al., 1998; Godshalk & Sosik, 2000). Those researchers who have included protégé’s and mentor’s ratings run separate analyses on aggregated data for the two groups (e.g., Fagenson-Eland, Marks & Amendola, 1997; Mullen, 1998; Mullen & Noe, 1999; Young & Perrewe, 2000). As such, these studies do not consider the dynamics that occur within each protégé-mentor pair and have been unable to assess whether protégé-mentor pairs agree about the provision of support that is given.

In fact, it is likely that there is considerable room for lack of agreement between the two mentoring parties (Baird & Kram, 1983; Young & Perrewe, 2000). Hennefrund (1986) claimed that in some relationships, protégés and mentors experienced marked differences in judgments. Baird and Kram (1983) suggest that needs, expectations, and perceptions of each party may be quite different due to the different career stage of the protégé and the mentor. These differences may mean that agreement between the two parties is difficult to reach given that they are approaching the relationship from such different bases. The effect of these differences may be further compounded when considering Young and Perrewe’s (2001) suggestion that the expectations and perceptions of each party are rarely defined or communicated in an explicit manner. Given the initial difference in expectations of the two parties agreement may be quite difficult to reach. The relatively intangible nature of psychosocial support (Noe, 1988) may mean that lack of agreement is particularly prevalent within this function of mentoring.

This study examines three sets of factors that may influence the ability of protégés and mentors to reach agreement about the provision of psychosocial support.

**Structural and experience aspects of the mentorship**

There are several aspects of the mentorship itself that may facilitate PMA. These include type of mentorship, length of mentorship, frequency with which mentor and protégé meet, previous experience with mentoring, and the gender-mix of the dyad. The type of mentorship, be it formal or informal, might influence PMA. Protégés and mentors in informal relationships may be more likely to hold a mutual view than those in formal relationships. This would be due to the higher levels of identification, similarity, motivation, and communication that are characteristic of informal relationships and also due to the fact that these informal pairs typically have a longer lasting relationship (Chao et al., 1992; Kram, 1985a; Mullen, 1998; Murray, 1991; Young & Perrewe, 2000). Length of the relationship and frequency of meetings are also likely to play a role in developing PMA. Although the evidence is mixed, these factors are positively related to the provision of mentoring (Mullen, 1998). Increased length and frequency may enable pairs to clarify expectations, develop trust and understanding, and to adjust attitudes and behaviors over time in order to develop a mutually-shared view. Previous experience with mentoring has been related to individuals’ willingness to mentor and be mentored (Allen, et al., 1997a; Fagenson-Eland et al., 1997). Previous experience may also influence PMA. People who have experience in a mentorship have first-hand experience of what it is like to be in such a relationship and may, therefore, have a better capacity to take the view of the other party and to negotiate a shared expectation and understanding.

A final factor that may be of relevance is the gender-mix of the dyad. Pepper and Kulik (2002) argued that “[m]entors and protégés of the same gender are more likely to share experiences and social identities that make communication easier and personal comfort greater” (p. 11). Ragins and McFarlin (1990) suggest that two mechanisms operate in cross-gender relationships to influence role perceptions: sexual concerns and restriction of identification. Although the evidence is mixed, results do show that protégés in same-gender dyads reported higher levels of psychosocial support than cross-gender (Koberg et al., 1998; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). It could also be that same-gender pairs achieve higher PMA.

**Hypothesis 1**: Type of mentorship, length of mentorship, frequency of meetings, previ-

Protégé and mentor personality

The current study applies the Big Five personality classification system to the mentoring relationship (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This organizing framework suggests that most of one’s personality can be summarized using five stable domains: neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. People high on agreeableness are fundamentally altruistic and strive for intimacy. They enjoy co-operative learning and are skilled at conflict resolution (Judge & Cable, 1997). Kram (1985a) suggested that protégés who were ‘enjoyable to be with’ and who could ‘tolerate conflict’ would be more attractive to potential mentors. The desire to create co-operative friendships, and the willingness to negotiate with others, mean that agreeable protégés and/or mentors are likely to achieve high levels of PMA. Extroverts are characterized as sociable, active, confident, expressive, energetic, and optimistic. Allen et al. (1997b) observed that mentors were attracted to protégés who were people-oriented. It is possible that protégés and/or mentors high on extroversion and who, therefore, seek to understand their interpersonal relationships, may have high PMA. Neuroticism is characterized by a person’s general tendency to view the world with negative or positive affect. Positive affectivity, organization-based self-esteem, and emotional stability (specific traits that form part of the higher order construct of neuroticism) are related to willingness to mentor and initiation of mentoring (Aryee et al., 1996; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Neuroticism may also be related to PMA in that if both, or either, party in the relationship is emotionally stable they may be better able to take the perspective of their partner than those who are neurotic and, therefore, only able to concentrate on their own anxiety and insecurity. People who are highly conscientious are said to be organized, systematic, reliable, efficient, persistent, and driven by a need for accomplishment. Allen et al. (1997a) found that locus of control and upward striving, traits rooted in the domain of conscientiousness, related positively to willingness to mentor. Conscientious protégés and/or mentors may be more likely to put in the effort and persistence necessary to achieve PMA. Openness to experience is reflected in intellectual curiosity, creativity, imagination, attentiveness to emotions, and receptiveness to new ideas. Mentors in Allen et al.’s (1997b) study stated that they were attracted to protégés who had an ‘openness to learn’ and an ‘openness to accept constructive feedback.’ It seems reasonable to suggest that higher levels of PMA will be achieved when protégés and/or mentors are high on openness.

Hypothesis 2: Extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness relate positively to PMA, while neuroticism relates negatively to PMA.

Personality may also be associated with the structural and experience aspects of the mentorship. Chao et al.’s (1992) finding that protégés who became informally mentored were selected because they seemed ‘open’ to the advice and ideas from mentors, indicates that the trait of openness may influence the type of mentorship formed. It is also possible that domains such as extroversion and agreeableness may make people more willing to be involved in a mentorship, hence leading to them having past experience. Finally, it might be suggested that people high on conscientiousness would reliably meet on a frequent basis and would also persist in a long-term relationship, therefore, relating to the length and frequency aspects of the mentorship.

Hypothesis 3: Extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness relate positively to the structural and experience aspect of the mentorship, while neuroticism relates negatively.

Protégé and mentor workload

High workloads and high time demands on the mentor, as well as a mentor’s job-induced stress, have been highlighted as inhibiting factors in a person’s willingness to become a mentor (Allen et al., 1997a; 1997b). Mentors and/or protégés who are working under conditions of overload may find that the mentorship
competes with the demands placed upon them by their own job duties. When these demands are high, the time and energy needed to establish PMA may be reduced.

**Hypothesis 4**: Workload of mentors and protégés relates negatively to PMA.

Workload may also influence the structural and experience aspects of the mentorship itself. For example, when a protégé or a mentor has a high workload they may not have the time to meet on a frequent basis or to continue the relationship over a long period of time. Protégés and mentors with high workloads may also not volunteer to be involved in formal programs.

**Hypothesis 5**: Workload of the mentors and protégés relates negatively to structural and experience aspects of the mentorship.

Potential outcomes of PMA in relation to the provision of psychosocial support

Psychosocial support is reported to facilitate the protégé’s career by enhancing confidence in professional role as well as improving job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Corzine, Buntzman & Busch, 1994; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Noe, 1988). Research into the outcomes of mentoring for the mentors themselves is still in its relative infancy (Mullen & Noe, 1999; Young & Perrewe, 2000). However, Allen et al.’s (1997b) qualitative research indicates that job satisfaction, organizational commitment and work self-esteem are outcomes that are worthy of investigation in relation to mentors. Amongst other things, mentors interviewed in their study stated that mentoring was beneficial because it promoted esteem and satisfaction through helping other people succeed.

**Hypothesis 6**: Protégé-mentor agreement relates positively to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work self-esteem for protégés and mentors.

These hypothesized relationships are presented in Figure 1 below.

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**METHOD**

**Sample and procedure**

Seven hundred administrative and IT staff, who were classified in the lower and middle professional levels within an Australian university, were sent a questionnaire through the internal mail system. They were provided with a definition of mentoring (see Chao et al.’s [1992] definition) and asked, if they currently had a mentor within the university, to complete the questionnaire and nominate their mentor. Two hundred and seventy protégés returned usable responses (38%). Protégés had been working for the university, on average, 3.9 (± 2.6) years (60% female; age = 29.97 ±4.56).

Mentors were contacted via the internal telephone system. Of the 256 mentors who were contacted, 214 agreed to participate in the study (83.5%). The common reasons cited by the 42 mentors for not participating in this study were not enough time and too many other work demands. It may, therefore, be that there was an element of self-selection occurring in that mentors with high time demands and high workloads were less likely to participate in the study. This possibility must be kept in mind when interpreting the results. The 214 mentors who agreed to participate were sent essentially the same questionnaire as their protégés (without questions on length, type and frequency and with slight re-wording of some questions) by the internal mail. The mentors were senior administrative or IT staff (71%) and senior academic staff (29%). On average, the mentors had worked in the university for 9.7 (±5.2) years. The mean age was 47.17 (± 6.79) (55% female).

**Measures**

Structural and experience aspects of the mentorship. A series of binary measures were used to assess type of mentorship (formal = 0, informal = 1), gender-mix (cross-gender = 0, same-gender = 1), previous experience with mentoring (no =0, yes = 1), duration of mentorship (number of months), frequency with which mentors and protégés meet (five-point Likert scale). Protégé’s recorded the type of

mentorship, previous experience with mentoring, duration of mentorship, and frequency of meetings. Mentors rated their own previous experience. Dyad-sex was determined by the researcher once the questionnaires were completed. Both protégés and mentors completed the scales assessing PMA, personality, workload, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work self-esteem.

Protégé-mentor agreement. Agreement about the provision of psychosocial support was calculated by comparing each protégé’s score with their matched mentor’s score on Noe’s (1988) 14-item Psychosocial Support mentoring scale. The maximum difference achievable was 70 (e.g., where a mentor scores all fives and a protégés scores all ones or vice-versa). The scores were reversed so that a higher score reflected a higher level of PMA.

Protégé and mentor personality. Costa and McCrae’s (1992) NEO Five Factor Inventory was used. Each scale has 12 items that are scored along a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores reflect higher levels of the personality attribute. Cronbach’s alpha for the agreeableness scale was .86 in the protégé’ sample and .80 for mentors. Cronbach’s alpha for the openness scale was .80 in the protégé’ sample and .70 for mentors. Cronbach’s alpha for the extroversion scale was .78 in the protégé’ sample and .76 for mentors. Cronbach’s alpha for the neuroticism scale was .89 in the protégé’ sample and .86 for mentors. Finally, Cronbach’s alpha for the conscientiousness scale was .91 in the protégé’ sample and .87 for mentors.

Workload. Osipow’s (1998) ‘work overload’ subscale of the Occupational Stress Inventory was used. This subscale has ten items that are rated on a five-point Likert scale. A higher score is indicative of a higher workload. Cronbach’s alpha for the workload scale was .70 in the protégé’ sample and .90 for mentors.

Mentoring outcomes. Quinn and Sheppard’s (1974) questionnaire was used to assess job satisfaction (a five-item scale) and work self-esteem (a four-item scale). Both of these scales were rated on a seven-point Likert scale where a higher score reflected higher levels. Cronbach’s alpha for the job satisfaction scale was .77 in both the protégé’ and mentor samples. Cronbach’s alpha for the work-esteem scale was .89 in the protégé’ sample and .77 for mentors. Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian’s (1974) nine-item scales was used for organizational commitment. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale where higher scores reflected higher levels of organizational commitment. Cronbach’s alpha was .84 in the protégé’ sample and .87 for mentors.

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients for the variables used in this study. Sixty-seven percent of relationships were informal. Sixty-eight percent were in same-gender dyads. Prior experience was reported by 55% of mentors and 23% of protégés. The average duration of the relationship was 14.02 (± 6.44) months. On average, pairs met monthly (mean = 3.44, SD = .99). The protégé-mentor pairs displayed middling levels of agreement (33.62±5.84) and the PMA scores ranged from 18 to 41.

An independent samples t-test found that, in comparison to protégé ratings, mentors overrated the amount of psychosocial support they provided (t[165] = -9.12, p <.001) (Protégés = 43.80± 9.81: Mentors = 48.45± 10.34). Following procedures used by Godshalk and Sosik (2000) the pairs were also classified into groups according to whether the mentor over-rated or under-rated psychosocial support. Twelve pair were classified as under-raters, these pairs were removed from the analyses as Godshalk and Sosik (2000) found that under-rating pairs were conceptually distinct and had different outcomes to over-rating pairs.

Testing the study hypotheses

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses. The particular SEM technique used was Partial Least Squares (PLS). Gefen, Straub, and Boudreau (2000) argued that PLS is the most appropriate SEM approach to use when the aims of the study are predictive applications and/or theory building. As this study introduced a new model to examine the antecedents and consequences of
PMA, PLS was deemed to be the most suitable approach. Moreover, PLS is an appropriate test to use when sample sizes are below 200 (Chin & Newstead, 1999; Gefen, et al., 2000).

Measurement model
In testing the measurement model, PLS is designed to calculate the loading of items in a way that maximizes the explained variance for all the dependent variables in the model (rather than considering the loadings of each item on only one construct as is done in the covariance-based approaches). These loadings are depicted as the thinner lines in Figure 1 while the structural paths are presented as the thicker lines. Protégé neuroticism, previous experience of the protégé, duration of the mentorship, gender-mix, mentor conscientiousness, mentor neuroticism, mentor and protégé work self-esteem did not load significantly and were removed from the model.

Structural model
Once the validity of the measurement model was established the predictive power of the structural model was explored and four paths were found to be not significant: 1) protégé personality on to the structural and experience aspects of the mentorship, 2) protégé workload on to the structural and experience aspects of the mentorship, 3) protégé workload on to PMA and 4) mentor workload on to PMA. These pathways were removed (dotted lines in figure 1).

Sixty percent of the variance in PMA was explained via protégé personality ($t[144] = 6.77$, $p < .001$), structural and experience aspects of the mentorship ($t[144] = 4.22$, $p < .001$), mentor personality ($t[144] = 5.23$, $p < .001$), and mentor workload ($t[144] = -3.66$, $p < .001$). Mentor personality ($t[144] = 2.56$, $p < .01$) and mentor workload ($t[144] = -5.17$, $p < .01$) explained 17% of the variance in structural and experience aspects of the mentoring. PMA accounted for 36% of the variance in protégé outcomes ($t[144] = 12.73$, $p < .001$) and 21% of the variance in mentor outcomes ($t[144] = 7.22$, $p < .001$).

The significant relations between PMA with the structural and experience aspects of the mentorship partially support hypothesis one. The relations between PMA and protégé and mentor personality partially support hypothesis two. Personality of the mentor but not that of the protégé, related significantly to the structural and experience aspect of the mentorship. Similarly, the workload of the mentor, but not the protégé, related significantly to the structural and experience aspect of the mentorship and PMA. These results suggest that the mentors (via their personality and workload) have a stronger influence over the way the mentorship is structured, particularly in terms of type and frequency, than the protégés. In relation to the mentor group, hypotheses three, four and five were supported. However, these three hypotheses were not supported by the protégé data. Protégé-mentor agreement loaded significantly onto job satisfaction and organizational commitment for protégés and mentors but not work self-esteem, providing partial support for hypothesis six.

DISCUSSION
Kram and Bragar (1992) asserted that high-quality psychosocial support is only achieved when protégés and their mentors reach a mutual understanding. Yet a key finding in this study was that protégés and mentors are unlikely to agree on the amount of psychosocial support that is being provided. This finding supports Fagenson-Eland et al.’s (1997) claim that “protégés’ and mentors’ perceptions cannot be generalized to one another” (p. 37) and suggest that a more comprehensive understanding of psychosocial support is only likely to come when the views of both parties are assessed.

An assessment, and comparison, of both parties is especially important when considering that PMA related significantly to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Presumably, when mentors listen to the needs of the protégé and put in the time and effort necessary to establish a shared understanding, the mentorship will be more beneficial to the protégé. Protégés who receive the amount of support that they require are likely to feel more satisfied in their work environment. Mentors may also experience increased job satisfaction as a result of establishing PMA because they have successfully acquired an important interpersonal skill (that of being a mentor who un-
understands his/her protégé) and because they will be held in high regard by their protégé and, possibly, the organization. Mentors may also feel more commitment to their organization because they are investing in their company beyond their own specific job.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, PMA had a stronger impact upon the outcomes for protégés than for mentors. Mentoring is typically only one aspect of a broad work role for the mentor. Hence, although a successful mentorship is likely to have a positive effect upon work outcomes it may not strongly shape the way a mentor feels about his/her job and organization. In contrast, the receipt of mentoring has been shown to be a key factor in the development of a protégé’s career (Aryee et al., 1996). Thus, a successful mentorship is likely to be a strongly influential factor in shaping the protégé’s satisfaction and commitment.

The model presented in this paper suggests that, if the benefits of psychosocial mentoring are to be attained, organizations should encourage conditions that facilitate PMA. This can be done through altering a number of structural and experience aspects of the mentorship. In particular, organizations may identify and encourage people who have had past experience with mentoring to form new mentorships. This is because past experience related positively to PMA and seems to give people a greater capacity to understand the view of the other party.

Organizations also need to establish conditions that encourage the development of informal relationships, where mentors and protégés meet on a frequent basis. One way to do this is to reduce the workload of people who volunteer to be mentors so that they have the time and energy to initiate and develop informal relationships. However, as well as simply reducing workload, jobs need to be redesigned so that they encourage the spontaneous development of informal relationships by fostering more frequent interactions between junior and senior staff. Kram (1985ba; 1985b) and Kram and Bragar (1992) suggest that this may be done through the implementation of project teams and task forces.

The results of this study also indicate that the role of personality must be understood when attempting to facilitate PMA. When protégés and mentors had a personality profile characterized by high levels of agreeableness, openness, and extroversion (and conscientiousness for protégé’s), PMA was enhanced. These traits obviously help to create conditions that foster trust and communication in the relationship and, therefore, allow pairs to openly negotiate the level of psychosocial support that is required and can be realistically provided. They also ensure that judgments about the degree to which psychosocial support is being provided are more likely be made by consulting the other person.

One implication of these results may be that protégés and mentors could benefit from personality testing that enhances their own self-awareness about the way their personality may, or may not, encourage PMA. This may be included in the educational approach suggested by Kram (1985ba; 1985b) and Kram and Bragar (1992) where self-assessment, interpersonal skills training, and expectation setting are all encouraged.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This cross-sectional study captured PMA at one point of time, yet it is likely that PMA is a dynamic phenomenon. Whilst there may be some relatively unchangeable predictors of PMA such as personality and previous experience, there are also likely to be some antecedents that change over time. Situational factors such as workload, work-life issues, changes to company policies and practices (e.g., mentoring training programs), and changes to organizational climate (e.g., downsizing) may alter PMA. Length of the mentorship did not come out to be a significant variable. In future it may be more useful to consider the stages of mentoring, rather than assuming that length is linearly related to PMA.

It may be that these findings are only applicable to mentoring within universities. However, as the employees in this study were involved in the operational and business functions of the university there may be some generality to the findings. Moreover, given that the antecedents in this study were either dispositional (e.g., personality) or not unique to a
university sample (e.g., workload) the results may relate to other contexts.

The extent to which protégés and mentors agree about the level of psychosocial support being provided in their relationship is an important factor for work outcomes. However, this study has shown that PMA is not readily achieved. While the results point to a number of situational and dispositional factors that can be used to improve PMA, further work is needed to foster a greater understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of PMA.

References


Kram, K., & Bragar, M. (1992). Development through mentoring: A strategic ap-


Table 1: Correlations between PMA, Mentor Structural and Experience Variables, Personality, Workload, and Work Outcomes

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N = 166

Note: Coefficients for protégés’ personality, workload, and work outcomes are on the lower diagonal. Coefficients for mentors personality, workload, and work outcomes are on the upper diagonal. Columns 1 through 5 on the upper diagonal are not filled-in as mentors did not rate these variables.

Note: Correlations above .13 were significant at p < .05 (one-tailed). Correlations above .18 were significant at p < .01 (one-tailed).

A. Figure 1: The antecedents and outcomes of PMA in relation to psychosocial support