



## MLDC Research Areas

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Leadership & Training  
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# Mentoring Relationships and Demographic Diversity

## Abstract

In both civilian and military settings, mentoring has been recognized as an important factor in the career growth of junior personnel. However, there has been concern that women and racial/ethnic minorities lack access to high-quality mentoring relationships for a variety of reasons. To address this concern, many organizations have created mentoring programs to aid in the career development of women and minorities who tend to face more barriers to advancement. However, research indicates that, overall, women and minorities do not lack access to mentors but that they do lack access to mentors of the same gender or race/ethnicity. As a result, they are more likely to be in *mixed* (i.e., cross-gender and/or cross-race/ethnicity) mentoring relationships. These mixed mentoring relationships are more likely to provide career benefits, whereas mentoring relationships based on demographic similarity are more likely to provide psychosocial benefits. Therefore, organizations cannot assume that creating mentoring programs that target women and minorities will necessarily lead to better career progression for women and minorities and, ultimately, to more diversity among senior leadership.

In both civilian and military settings, mentoring has been recognized as an important factor in the career growth of junior personnel. However, there has been concern that women and racial/ethnic minorities lack access to high-quality mentoring relationships for a variety of reasons. To address this concern, and in the hopes of increasing diversity among senior leadership, many organizations have created special mentoring programs to aid in the career development of women and

minorities who tend to face more barriers to advancement (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002).

After providing a brief overview of how mentoring is defined and of the possible outcomes of mentoring, this issue paper summarizes research on two important concerns related to mentoring relationships and demographic diversity:

- 1) Do women and racial/ethnic minorities generally have access to mentoring relationships in organizations?
- 2) Do women and racial/ethnic minorities benefit from mentoring relationships in organizations?

## Defining Mentoring Relationships

There is no uniform definition of the term *mentor*: Mentors have been variously likened to coaches, sponsors, teachers, and role models. A traditional mentoring relationship is one in which a senior, more experienced individual (i.e., the mentor) commits to providing support to the career development of a junior, less experienced individual (i.e., the protégé or mentee). Mentors generally provide two main functions: career functions and psychosocial functions (Kram, 1983, 1985). Career functions are meant to help the mentee advance in his or her career and include coaching, sponsorship, protection, and providing challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions are meant to enhance a mentee's feelings of competence, identity, and effectiveness and include role modeling, friendship, counseling, and providing acceptance and confirmation.

Mentoring relationships can vary in terms of a variety of factors, such as length and intensity (i.e., strength of the bond between mentee and mentor). One of the most widely studied factors concerns how the relationship is formed. Formal (or facilitated) mentoring relationships are supported and authorized by the organization. Formal mentoring

relationships are usually initiated through a mentor-mentee matching process and are often monitored by the organization. Informal mentoring relationships are ones that occur spontaneously, with either the junior or senior individual (or both) initiating the relationship without organizational assistance. Some research studies have found that mentees in informal mentoring relationships experience more benefits (e.g., higher compensation) than mentees in formal mentoring relationships (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). However, Ragins, Cotton, and Miller (2000) found that mentee satisfaction with the mentoring relationship was more strongly related to mentee work attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction) than with the formality of the mentoring relationship. These findings suggest that formal mentoring relationships are not uniformly less beneficial than informal mentoring relationships.

Another important way in which mentoring relationships differ is in the relative ranks of mentors and their mentees. Some organizations, such as the Air Force, direct supervisors to mentor their direct reports (U.S. Air Force, 2000). Some have argued against using direct supervisors as mentors out of a concern that inequities in the supervisor's work group can arise (Keele, Bucker, & Bushnell, 1987). However, research conducted thus far has not found supervisory mentoring to be problematic. Ragins et al. (2000) found no differences between mentees with supervisors as mentors and mentees with higher-ranking mentors in terms of perceived relationship quality and job attitudes. Other researchers have in fact found positive effects: Mentees mentored by direct supervisors (or individuals closer in rank to the mentee) reported more role modeling (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006) and career functions (McGuire, 2007) than mentees mentored by individuals of higher rank. Taken together, these results suggest that supervisory mentoring may be beneficial to mentees or that it at least may not differ from nonsupervisory mentoring relationships in terms of benefits to the mentee.

### **The Benefits and Costs of Mentoring**

Mentoring relationships can benefit both mentees and mentors. In a meta-analysis of mentoring and career benefits, Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) found that mentored individuals had higher compensation, more promotions, greater career satisfaction, greater expectations for advancement, more career commitment, and higher job satisfaction than nonmentored individuals. For mentors, the benefits of mentoring include satisfying their needs for generativity (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), improving their job performance by getting access to new information via mentees (Mullen & Noe, 1999), and having a loyal base of support (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Increased mentee commitment and satisfaction and improved mentor performance yield benefits for the organization or institution.

Although mentoring is usually associated with positive outcomes, mentoring relationships can also be negative. Scandura (1998) argued that some mentoring relationships can be

dysfunctional, involving either or both parties in bullying, betrayal, or other negative behaviors. Mentoring relationships can also suffer from negative perceptions on the part of those outside the relationship, who may view the relationship with suspicion (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1999).

The specific combinations of both mentor and mentee characteristics are believed to determine whether the relationship yields more costs than benefits or, hopefully, more benefits than costs (Scandura, 1998). A major factor in whether mentoring relationships yield more benefits than costs is the perceived similarity between mentees and mentors. Mentees who perceive greater similarities between themselves and their mentors report receiving more psychosocial mentoring (Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006) and having higher quality relationships (Finkelstein, Allen, & Montei, 2002) than mentees who perceive fewer similarities between themselves and their mentors. Despite the importance of perceived similarity, little is known about all the characteristics that mentees and mentors reference when making similarity judgments. That is, perceived similarity can be due to surface-level factors, such as demographics, to deeper-level factors, such as shared attitudes and values, or to both. Some research suggests that deeper-level factors, like shared attitudes, are more important to mentees' perceived similarity judgments than are similarities in such demographic characteristics as gender (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Marelich, 2002).

### **Demographic Attributes and Access to Mentors**

A lot of mentoring research has focused on the relationship between the demographic attributes of junior personnel and the ability to access mentors. In particular, many studies have examined whether there are gender differences in access to mentors. Although some studies have found that men are more likely than women to have mentors (e.g., Nielson, Carlson, & Lankau, 2001), many other studies have found no such gender differences (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996; Fagenson, 1989; Steinberg & Nourizadeh, 2001). A lack of gender differences in access to mentors is also supported by a meta-analysis by Hezlett (2003), who also found very little evidence that age and education relate to having a mentor.

Less systematic research has been done on the relationship between race/ethnicity and access to mentors, and the results of what research there is are mixed: Some studies have suggested that there might be racial/ethnic differences (e.g., Knouse, 1991), whereas other studies have suggested that there are not (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996; Steinberg & Foley, 1999). More-recent studies favor a lack of racial/ethnic differences.

Although women and racial/ethnic minorities may not lack access to mentors, there is evidence that they are more likely than white men to be in *mixed* (i.e., cross-gender and/or cross-race/ethnicity) mentoring relationships. Specifically, compared with white men, women are more likely to be in

cross-gender mentoring relationships, and racial/ethnic minorities are more likely to be in cross-race or cross-ethnicity mentoring relationships. (See, e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Thomas, 1990.) This is likely because the pool of potential mentors contains more white males (because there are larger numbers of white men in senior positions in organizations).

### **Demographic Attributes and Mentoring-Relationship Quality**

Because women and racial/ethnic minorities may have more-limited access to mentors of the same gender and race/ethnicity than to white male mentors, there has been concern that they may not receive the full array of benefits from mentoring relationships. Again, the evidence is mixed. On one hand, there is evidence that female and racial/ethnic minority mentees with white male mentors may earn more money than mentees with female or nonwhite mentors (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996), which suggests that female and racial/ethnic minority mentees get career benefits from being in mixed mentoring relationships. On the other hand, female mentees with female mentors report receiving more psychosocial support (e.g., Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998) and role modeling functions (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990) than do female mentees with male mentors. Likewise, racial/ethnic minority mentees with mentors of the same race/ethnicity report receiving more psychosocial support (Koberg et al., 1998; Thomas, 1990) and career development support (Ensher & Murphy, 1997). Therefore, female and racial/ethnic minority mentees may derive a different set of benefits from same-gender and same-race/ethnicity mentoring relationships than from mixed mentoring relationships.

Ragins (2007) argued that the issue of relationship quality is not well understood because researchers have had a narrow focus when studying factors that influence mentoring relationships. For example, some studies look at relationship-quality differences in terms of mentee race/ethnicity or mentee gender, whereas others examine relationship quality in terms of the combination of mentee race/ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, the measurement of relationship quality has largely been restricted to career development and psychosocial functions, such as mentee promotion, and less focused on subjective outcomes, such as increased self-efficacy of mentees. Ragins thus argued that researchers and organizations developing mentoring programs need to cast the net more widely by looking at more outcomes, by attempting to understand why some mentoring relationships become high quality while others do not, and by understanding the dynamics of mixed mentoring relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Mentoring is often viewed as an essential career development tool in organizations. Indeed, mentoring has been found to relate to career development benefits, such as faster promotions, and psychosocial benefits, such as having a role

model at work. However, mentoring is not necessarily a magic bullet: Mentoring relationships can be dysfunctional, regardless of the demographics of the mentor and mentee. To make matters more complicated, our knowledge about the nature of mixed mentoring relationships is still incomplete. Based on the available research, the key results can be summarized as follows:

- Research indicates that, overall, women and minorities do not lack access to mentors but that they do lack access to mentors of the same gender or race/ethnicity. As a result, they are more likely to be in mixed mentoring relationships.
- Research indicates that mixed mentoring relationships are more likely to provide career benefits, whereas mentoring relationships based on demographic similarity are more likely to provide psychosocial benefits.

Until more is known about the effects of both types of mentoring relationships, organizations cannot assume that creating mentoring programs that target members of historically disadvantaged groups will necessarily lead to better career progression for these people and, ultimately, to more diversity among senior leadership. As with any organizational intervention, a mentoring program requires careful design and evaluation to be effective.

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