

# 17 Mentoring Relationships

## A COMPARISON OF EXPERIENCES IN BUSINESS AND ACADEMIA

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This essay began as my part of a panel discussion presented at a 1993 preconference session of the Academy of Management. The session was titled "Working With Doctoral Students," and it included presentations by five other faculty members, with an emphasis on each individual's personal experiences of working with doctoral students. At the time of the presentation, I had just defended my dissertation and had not yet started my new job as an assistant professor at Michigan State University. I did not have any personal experience working with doctoral students as a faculty member. So, I asked myself, What could I contribute to the panel discussion that might be unique? I did not want to presume to speak for doctoral students in general, because I believe (based on personal experience and observation) that the key characteristics of working with doctoral students are the diversity of relationships and the uniqueness of each dyadic pair.

As I continued to think about what I could contribute to the panel discussion, I found myself comparing my mentor-mentee experiences in academia with those that I had previously experienced in the business world. I concluded that this comparison might be interesting to others and that my experiences might stimulate insights among "second-career" students and faculty who were working with such students.

In order to put my comments in perspective, I offer the following information on my background. Before I entered the PhD program at the University of Minnesota, I had worked for several different business organizations for more than 15 years in positions of increasing responsibility as a human resources executive. Thus my PhD student years were the beginning of a second career. Why did I choose to change careers? My primary motivation was to increase the amount of intellectual stimulation in my life. In addition, my work experience had led

me to generate a number of research questions. I was curious about why some employees were willing to take initiative and speak up with constructive recommendations for change, whereas others simply accepted the status quo. Over the years, based on my work experiences with managers and employees in four different organizations as well as ongoing conversations with senior executives of many different organizations, I had developed the belief that in changing environments, organizational performance is enhanced when employees exercise initiative and when they are willing to take the risks of challenging standard operating procedures and suggesting new approaches. I wanted to research this proposed relationship and gain a better understanding of what individual and situational factors lead to initiating behaviors in the work place.

As a graduate student, I worked with a number of mentors and benefited in different ways from each relationship. I include Hal Angle, Larry Cummings, Chris Earley, Judi Parks, and Jon Pierce as key mentors who contributed significantly to my development. I learned from each of these special individuals. Some of what I learned concerns behaviors that I want to replicate, whereas other lessons concern behaviors that I hope I never exhibit. There were high points and low points in each relationship, and as each evolved into more distant interaction, I felt a sense of loss and separation. Typically, I found myself wishing that the closeness and excitement that represented the "best of times" could continue. Nevertheless, I realized that the changes represented rites of passage.

The following comments are based on my personal experiences in *informal* mentoring relationships. I use the concept of *informal* mentoring to describe close and intense personal relationships between individuals with hierarchical differences in status where the interaction involves career guidance, emotional support, and loyalty. In these relationships, one individual is more senior and the other is more junior in terms of experience in a particular job, profession, or organization. I focus on *informal* mentoring relationships that develop spontaneously, without formal organizational support or encouragement, in order to differentiate these types of experiences from more formal, organizationally sanctioned relationships.

When I first began this comparison, my thoughts centered on the *differences* between mentoring in business and mentoring in academia. After several months, however, I found myself emphasizing the similarities as well as the differences. The organization of this essay follows the same progression. First, I focus on the differences; second, I consider the similarities.

### Differences Between Business and Academia

In general, three key differences emerge when I review my personal experiences with *informal* mentoring relationships. First, in business settings, most mentor relationships focus on socialization into fairly well defined roles in the organization. In contrast, in academic settings, mentor relationships seem more personal. The emphasis is not on helping a protégé fit into a predefined role in a specific organization, but on socialization into a profession that transcends organizational boundaries. There are exceptions to these generalizations. Clearly, some socialization of doctoral students focuses on specific departments and institutions. Similarly, there are professional roles in business settings where new recruits are socialized simultaneously into organizational roles and professional roles. Nevertheless, my observations in both settings suggest that the typical mentoring role in business emphasizes helping an individual adjust to the organization's expectations. In academic settings, the best mentors develop their students and socialize them into the academic profession.

For example, in one business organization everyone joked about how a particular vice president was able to clone administrative assistants. Even though there was fairly high turnover in the job, the incumbents were extremely loyal to the vice president and seemed more similar to each other than different. In this business setting, the emphasis was on fitting in and doing the job as it had been done in the past. In contrast, I did not observe any obvious patterns in the relationships between faculty and students in my PhD program. Instead, faculty members seemed to work with a wide variety of students, on a wide variety of topics.

The emphasis in universities on professional socialization rather than institutional socializa-

tion leads to additional contrasts between business and academic mentoring relationships. One of the key objectives of most doctoral programs is training future scholars to develop their own research programs. In general, the typical job content of an academic position is more variable and more idiosyncratic than the job content of a typical position in a business organization. Thus I believe that the best mentors in academia help their students discover and develop their own research interests. Even though students can become coauthors faster when they work with faculty on existing research projects, it is also important for students to generate their own research ideas. In some situations, faculty may need to help students examine their past experiences in order to identify research questions that have personal relevance to the students and will have lasting interest for them.

Accordingly, a successful mentor in academia must listen to the student—both what is said and what is not said—in an attempt to facilitate clarification of the student's interests. Additionally, mentors can play a significant role in helping students transform their general interests into researchable questions that can be examined within theoretical frameworks. The driving force thus emerges from within the individual student, and not from the mentor. An ideal mentor draws out what is already in the student; he or she does not impose a research agenda on the student.

Every dyadic relationship is unique, whether it exists in a business setting or an academic setting. Nevertheless, the emphasis in doctoral student training on developing student ideas necessitates a more reciprocal and responsive relationship than that between mentor and mentee in business, where the content of the role is defined by the organization and one of the key contributions of the mentor is to assist the individual in fitting into organizational roles.

Second, although promotions are institutionalized in both settings, the timing of transitions in academia (particularly those involving doctoral students) is more predictable than the timing of transitions in business. In academia there is a well-established pattern of transition after 4-5 years from the role of PhD student to the role of assistant professor. This transition usually involves a physical move, such that the mentor and mentee are no longer in close physical proximity. This transition is predictable and

more or less unavoidable. In contrast, in business settings, the duration of a proximate, informal mentor-mentee relationships is open-ended. The timing of promotions and transfers is unpredictable, because individuals are promoted or transferred based on business needs. These needs fluctuate over time and often are based on external economic factors. In business there often is little warning of disruptive changes in proximity for mentors and mentees. If a vice president decides to transfer a general manager, this may happen suddenly and somewhat unpredictably. Thus transitions in mentoring relationships in business are more abrupt and less predictable.

Something that happened to me early in my career serves as an illustration of the open-ended nature of business mentor-mentee relationships. I was working for an upwardly mobile individual who had invested significantly in my development. At one of our periodic career planning/progress review meetings, this individual "warned" me that I most likely would not be able to complete all the projects that we had just outlined in detail because a reorganization "might" occur and I "might" be getting new responsibilities. I was left with a general feeling that my job would be changing and that my mentor would be assuming a new and more distant role, but no one knew exactly when things would change or how they would be different. Similarly, several years later, an associate of mine commented that he never knew how long it would be until the next reorganization would force him to find a new junior associate to develop. From his perspective, the only things constant in the job were change and the inability to predict the timing of change.

A third difference between mentoring in academia and mentoring in business involves the cycling of relationships that is built into the structure of the system. Just as the transition from doctoral student to assistant professor is predictable, so is the matriculation of new PhD students that could benefit from mentoring relationships. Thus the system constantly renews itself, as more senior students progress through doctoral programs and are replaced by new students. This contrasts with business, where entry into jobs, exit from jobs, and replacement with new hires is generally not standardized. In addition, many business organizations that in the past have traditionally hired, trained, and

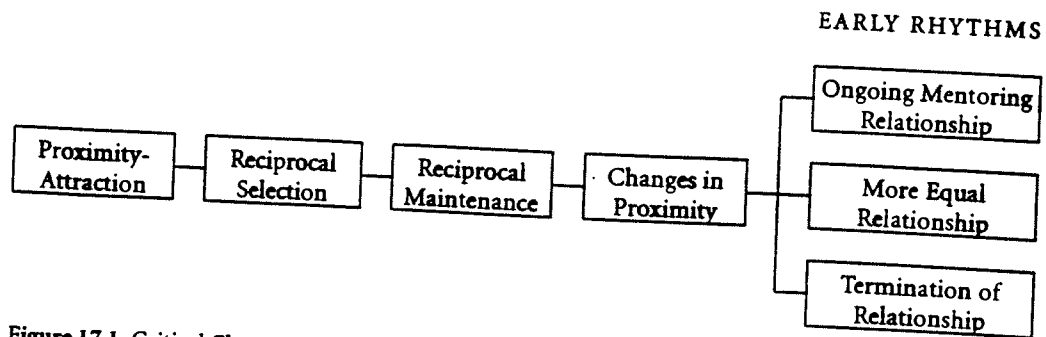


Figure 17.1. Critical Characteristics of Informal Mentoring Relationships

socialized new entrants in cohorts now have de-emphasized large recruiting programs based on downsizing and cost-containment practices.

I have observed two contrasting faculty responses to this "flow" of doctoral students through the educational system. Informal mentoring requires personal commitment, involvement, time, and attention from faculty members. The flow of students through the system makes significant demands on faculty and ensures that mentoring relationships change over time. Some faculty members seem to view doctoral students as a renewable resource subject to constant and predictable changes. These mentors are excited about each new cohort of PhD students as a source of new and exciting *potential* relationships that might be mutually stimulating and rewarding. From this perspective, mentoring doctoral students provides faculty with exposure to constantly changing interests and opportunities. On the other hand, not all faculty members actively engage in mentoring. Some seem to avoid mentoring doctoral students; perhaps they feel it is not worth the investment. Perhaps the demands of mentoring seem too high given the relatively short duration of the proximal relationship.

#### Similarities Between Business and Academia

Although my initial thoughts about mentoring in business and academia concentrated on the differences between the two settings, reflection over a longer period of time has led me to concentrate more on the similarities. This change in emphasis is based on my analysis of specific mentor-mentee relationships that I have experienced and observed in both set-

tings. The preliminary model depicted in Figure 17.1 summarizes my view of the characteristics of *informal* mentoring relationships that are critical in both business and academia. I describe the elements of this model in turn below.

*Proximity-attraction.* From my perspective, informal mentoring in both business and academia begins with physical proximity and a developing awareness of similar interests. These shared interests can include work and nonwork domains and are based on face-to-face personal interaction.

*Reciprocal selection.* Regardless of setting, if both individuals recognize their mutual interests, the possibility of reciprocal selection occurs. In other words, an informal mentor-mentee relationship will develop *only* if both individuals are attracted to each other and both are willing to invest in the relationship. Unlike formal mentoring relationships, where the organization provides structure and encourages the development of a supportive relationship, an informal mentoring relationship requires the active interest and participation of both partners. If only one person is interested or there is a significant imbalance in the degree of interest or willingness to interact, the two individuals are unlikely to develop a mentor-mentee relationship.

Thus the emergence of an informal mentoring relationship is based on reciprocal selection. It is not a simple function of the mentor "picking" the mentee and then developing him or her. Likewise, it is not a simple function of the mentee seeking out a mentor and becoming available for development. If selection is not mutual, problems will develop. For example, if a more senior individual aggressively attempts

to provide mentoring to a more junior individual and this attention and development is not wanted, the mentoring efforts will be viewed as interference and attempts to control. Similarly, if a more junior individual aggressively attempts to obtain the support of a more senior individual when the senior individual prefers to avoid this type of involvement, attempts to develop a mentoring relationship will be viewed as manipulative.

*Reciprocal maintenance.* In business settings and in academic settings, an informal mentor-mentee relationship cannot be maintained unless both mentor and mentee actually invest time and energy in the relationship on an ongoing basis. This suggests that shared interests and willingness to invest must be followed by actual behavioral investment. Although both partners need not make precisely equal investments in the short run, mutual and reciprocal investment is required for a continuing and healthy relationship with benefits to both parties.

*Changes in proximity.* Finally, although the timing and predictability of changes in proximity may differ between academia and business, transitions involving changes in proximity occur in both settings. The proximity that allows recognition of shared interests, development of the relationship, and maintenance of the relationship can rarely be continued indefinitely. Changes in proximity are almost inevitable in both settings. PhD students graduate and move to other institutions. Employees in business organizations are promoted, transferred, or hired by new organizations.

In some cases, changes in proximity act as a catalyst for development of the relationship. Although contact is not as convenient with more distal relationships, reciprocal commitment to a continuing relationship can facilitate personal growth for both mentor and mentee. After changes in proximity, some mentoring relationships retain the senior/junior distinctions, whereas others evolve into relationships characterized more by equality. In other cases,

changes in proximity lead to the dissolution of the relationship.

These transitions can be difficult for both mentor and mentee. The very closeness and personal nature of the relationship can make these changes in proximity challenging, regardless of whether the setting is business or academia.

## Summary

In this essay I have pointed out three significant differences that I have observed between mentoring relationships in business and academia. First, mentoring in business often tends to emphasize socialization of the individual to "fit" into a preexisting organizational role, whereas mentoring in academia tends to emphasize socialization of the individual into the profession, with a focus on developing the research ideas of the individual. Thus mentoring in academia can be more personal, more idiosyncratic, and more reciprocal than mentoring in business.

Second, the timing of transitions in academia is more predictable than that in business, given the fairly standardized movement from being a doctoral student to becoming an assistant professor. In business, transitions are often externally initiated and based on business needs. Thus the timing of changes in the proximity of mentor-mentee relationships in business can be less predictable than in academia.

Third, informal mentoring in academia involves a constant flow of PhD students through the system. Healthy PhD programs continually admit students and graduate students. Faculty, accordingly, have recurring opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with a variety of students over time.

Finally, I have proposed a preliminary model of informal mentoring processes based on my perceptions of the similarities between mentoring relationships in business and academia. I hope that these observations of the similarities and differences are interesting and also helpful to readers who are involved in mentoring relationships where the student has significant prior work experience.

Management in the School of Management at Georgia Institute of Technology. Her MA in labor and industrial relations and PhD in business administration are from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Prior to joining Georgia Tech, she was an Assistant Professor of Management and Policy at the University of Arizona. Her research interests include examining the effects of social and contextual factors on creative performance. She is also involved in exploring the boundaries of traditional goal-setting programs, such as the effects of multiple goals and competing goals on resource allocation and performance outcomes. Her research has appeared in such places as the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management*. She has been the recipient of a number of teaching awards, including Outstanding Undergraduate Teacher and Business Teacher of the Year.

Robert I. Sutton is Professor of Organizational Behavior in Stanford University's Department of Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management. He received his PhD degree in organizational psychology from the University of Michigan in 1984 and has been at Stanford since he left graduate school, except for 2 years (1986-1987, 1994-1995) spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. Most of his research uses psychological theory, alone or in combination with sociological perspectives, to help understand how people influence and are influenced by their organizational contexts. His research style emphasizes the development of theory on the basis of direct observation of organizational life and interviews with engineers, managers, and other organization members. He also does survey research studies now and then, and is thinking about trying an experiment in the next couple of years. He has done a lot of work on job stress and organizational decline and death in the past, but he is not interested in these areas any longer. He also continues to work on organizational impression management, although he seems to be losing interest in this topic as well. These days, he is interested in felt and expressed emotion in organization, intense public scrutiny, brainstorming, managerial rhetoric, how organizations try to innovate routinely, and

performance as a strange and sometimes dysfunctional obsession for organizational researchers. He has served on the editorial boards of the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Executive*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Organization Science*, and recently resigned as associate editor of the *Administrative Science Quarterly*. He would rather do research than any other part of his job; he finds writing the most fun. He doesn't like being an administrator very much, and he doesn't like tasks where he has to judge other people or their work, but the pressures to do these kinds of tasks keep increasing as he gets older.

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