

**Mentoring and Other Forms of  
Social Support in the Military**

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## Mentoring and Other Forms of Social Support in the Military

Mentoring, the act of providing wise and friendly counsel, has been practiced throughout the ages. In most cultures, wiser or more experienced persons have played significant and respected roles in guiding the personal and professional decisions of those younger and less experienced. In academic life a professor takes under his or her wing a promising student, and advises, teaches, and supports the students through a developmental process whereby the student evolves from a novice to an expert in the field. In the business setting a senior executive identifies a junior executive as a promising individual, and grooms the younger man or woman for entree into the boardroom.

Natural mentoring is often the result of serendipitous contacts in which two individuals discover a mutual attraction, and develop a working and personal relationship. The individuals uncover similar interests and begin to form a relationship where the more experienced person becomes an unofficial intermediary, confidant, and advisor to the less experienced person.

Additionally, an important role performed by mentors is to act as a socialization agent for the newcomer (Valadez & Duran, 1991). The mentor prepares individuals to become an integral part of the social structure. The newcomer's self-esteem gains strength through participation in the

organization's activities and through the acquisition of the cultural knowledge that characterizes the organization. The social standards of the organization exert powerful effects in developing the individual's personal sense of community and continuity, and continues throughout the individual's career.

Mastering the cultural nuances of the organization contributes to a sense of belonging for the individual. Survival in the organization often depends upon the individual understanding the behaviors and existing order of affairs that contribute to newcomers being welcomed and integrated into the community. By learning about the existing institutions newcomers perform in a role that harmonizes with the ideals of duty and responsibility demanded by the organization.

Acquiring the cultural knowledge of the organization proceeds through various methods. The individual learns through observation, practice, and is taught the skills and other necessary information to perform a job and to achieve success in the organization. Some individuals have the benefit of being singled out by a higher ranking person who shares bits of information and advice that is often helpful to the socialization of the newcomer. This mentoring can help ease the socialization process for the newcomer, and at times can provide an individual with inside information that will enhance his or her career goals.

Although mentoring is an area that has been widely researched, empirical evidence concerning the impact mentoring

has on a person's life is scanty (Merriam, 1983). Numerous studies on mentoring have been undertaken in the academic world and the business environment, however studies investigating mentoring in the military are relatively rare. This study attempts to describe mentoring relationships in the military, and to identify key elements in the relationship that contribute to an individual's career development. Available evidence supports the notion the mentoring is beneficial to a person's career. The data say little, however, about the nature of the relationship, and the elements of the relationship that contribute to the younger persons career.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The framework for studying mentoring in the military emerged from theories of learning and cognitive development proposed by Vygotsky and other Soviet psychologists of the early 20th century (Wertsch, 1985). According to Vygotsky and his followers, learning occurs in social settings that provide the opportunity for the learner to acquire appropriate skills for accomplishing a task through joint problem solving with a more capable person. In the case of the military, the settings and activities of the military workplace and the social interaction between individuals their supervisors, provided the context for the teaching and learning. Within this framework, this study examined how knowledge was acquired

by individuals through their social interactions with superior officers, and other knowledgeable persons in the military setting.

### **Methods**

The questions in this research call for explanations of behaviors and descriptions of social interactions that occur in the military workplace. The case study method is an ideal method for examining the processes involved in mentoring relationships and providing descriptions of settings, activities, and other relevant elements that characterize the relationship and place the activities and beliefs of the participants in context (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). The nature of this research gave the participants the opportunity to report their career development in their own words and through their own perspectives. In the case studies described, the goal was to describe in detail the aspects of the mentoring relationship and ensuing activities that contributed to a military person's career development.

### **Procedures**

There were 22 informants in the study. The informants consisted of both officers and noncommissioned officers participating in an equal opportunity management course at a military base in the southeastern United States. Fourteen men and eight women were interviewed. Four of the men were white,

two were Hispanic and eight were African-American. Four of the women were white and four were African-American. Each of the informants was interviewed for approximately one hour. An interview guide was used to make sure key topics were explored. The questions were otherwise open-ended, and made allowances to change directions or adapt to new situations in the course of the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

The data for the study consisted of the taped interviews, background information on the military provided by the base staff. The method for processing the data consisted of developing a coding system for organizing the data. Coding the data involved assigning descriptive terms to pieces of data and placing the data in appropriate categories. In addition to coding the data, comments or research memos were written to provide more elaborate descriptions of the codes, and to interpret segments of the data. The memos were also important in the data reduction phase and in identifying major themes. The strategy for data reduction was to organize the data into larger more conceptual codes or themes, using memos as a guide for linking and categorizing the data.

## Findings

Four major themes emerged from this data. They were: (1) caring; (2) information sharing; (3) support; and (4) teamwork.

### *Caring*

When individuals were asked to describe people who had influenced their lives, several described individuals who had shown concern for the careers of their subordinates. Words such as "caring", "open", "concerned", and "not judgemental" were used to characterize these individuals. A junior officer commented about his commanding officer: "He was approachable, objective... he didn't tell me what to do... he listened and helped me sort out the pros and cons of the decision I was about to make."

The mentoring relationship is often an emotionally charged relationship, and feelings toward an individual must convey a willingness on the part of the mentor to take interest in the person's career, and may extend toward concern about the person's family and personal life. The level of caring may vary, but the most consistent aspect of the caring feature was that mentors had sensitivity about their subordinate's welfare and interest in teaching the younger person the cultural knowledge necessary for a successful military career.

Mentors were able to articulate to subordinates the importance of fulfilling roles in an organization. The mentor could communicate that each person contributed to the overall goal of defending the nation. A female officer commented about her superior: "He had an innate understanding of teamwork... gender or race made no difference to him, he was just interested in getting everyone to work toward a common goal." Mentors who exhibited these qualities were committed to the development of younger officers to fill roles necessary for the smooth operation of the military. Through training of individuals, and assuring that each member of the team acquired the cultural knowledge necessary for functioning in the organization, the mentor was guaranteeing that knowledgeable and effective individuals would assume positions on his or her staff. Through this process of training and developing staff, the mentor contributed to the overall growth and development of the organization.

The caring officer was also able to provide opportunities for individuals to practice and experiment. Several of the informants described situations where they were given the freedom to act independently. Those supervisors who were committed to developing independent thought in their subordinates gave them increasing responsibility to act and make decisions on their own. A young officer commented: "He let me go out and try things and if I screwed up, he would ask, did I learn anything from the experience?"

### *Information Sharing*

A consistent theme throughout the study was that information for career success was available, but was not always easily accessible. Career development in the military often depends on being chosen for key assignments, avoiding dead-end career paths, and receiving the proper training for achieving promotion. The information is ordinarily communicated by word-of-mouth in informal sessions or through the counsel of informed individuals to those desiring the information. One senior officer stated: "I always say that there are two kinds of information... there's the information that's written down, and then there's the rest of the story. It's the rest of the story that can make the difference."

The sharing of knowledge has importance beyond an individual's career development. Individuals need to acquire information about military life that will enable them to operate with confidence in the military environment. The information or rules about military life may be written or unwritten, and often knowledge of the unwritten rules may be as important as the written rules. The unwritten rules encompass primarily, forms of behavior, attitudes, and beliefs that govern military life. Conforming to these codes of behavior may be influential in determining whether an individual will achieve success or not.

A mentor could be most helpful in guiding and teaching individuals about the nuances of military culture that are

essential for career advancement. The inability of an officer or noncommissioned officer to learn the mores, the traditions, and beliefs of military culture could serve to relegate a person to the margin of military life. An officer said: "It's important to know how to act at social functions... saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing could be damaging to your career."

Individuals who attempt to achieve success on the margin of military culture are indeed handicapped. Marginalized individuals operate at considerable distance from the center of the military mainstream. These individuals do not have easy access to information being shared by the inner circle, and by attempting to operate on the margin, they must make considerable effort to gain access to the inside information. An officer said: "The guys used to get together on ship and talk over coffee. We talked about a lot of things, but when a woman came to join us, we stopped talking. Women really have it tough in the [service]."

Marginalized individuals may diligently seek out information, but often their positions outside of the mainstream lead these individuals to despair and withdrawal from the organization. Information sharing is a critical element in the development of the military person's career, and access to that information often determines whether that person will succeed or not.

### *Support*

Informants often cited supportive individuals as being important to adjustment to the military. Young officers and enlisted persons often enter the military with only limited knowledge of the jobs they are to perform, and they understand virtually nothing about the culture of the military. Because of their limited background it is not unusual for the newcomer to err, or to feel uncomfortable in their new surroundings. Having a supportive person who can counsel, advise, and direct a newcomer eases the transition to the new surroundings. A female noncommissioned officer said: "I didn't know anything... It was the first time I had been on a plane...I was really scared when I got to boot camp." Many of the informants were in the same position. Most were still teenagers when they joined the military, and they had little experience with life outside their home towns. The presence of supportive individuals who offered advice, and eased the transition to the military was helpful to many of the individuals. One female noncommissioned officer said: "The senior NCO was real helpful... She told me a lot of things and really helped me decide about my career."

Young officers and noncommissioned officers expressed the notion that they needed to be trusted and given independence on their new jobs. An officer recalled an experience: "I was having a bad time at [the military base]. I transferred to [another base] and I blossomed. I was prepared and I could

make decisions without fear of being second-guessed." This little anecdote characterizes what is meant by providing a supportive atmosphere for a young officer to assume a responsible position and to be given the freedom and authority to make decisions.

The supportive officer provides subordinates with the opportunity to "learn by doing," but is also careful to provide feedback and direction whenever appropriate. Detailed instructions may be important at the outset of the task, but as both mentor and protege gain confidence and understanding of the task, detailed instructions lose their impact and are perceived as interference. Successful mentors have the knack of knowing when, where, and how to provide instruction. The ingredient that is always necessary, however, is the openness and the willingness to provide guidance and counsel when it is sought by the protege. There is a point however, when the subordinate must be encouraged to take initiative, and to make decisions on his or her own. Achieving this balance of mentor and instructor is a difficult one to attain, but essential in the development of military leaders

#### *Teamwork*

Not surprisingly, mentors who were most successful in developing younger officers and enlisted men and women to assume positions of leadership were those who instilled feelings of teamwork and commitment to the organization. The

promulgation of teamwork was most notable among those officers who made attempts to draw in all members of the staff toward a common goal. An officer said: "Sometimes I just had to sit the men (sic) down and explain to them why they had to do certain things, even if they seemed trivial. If they didn't take care of the little problem now, it could have an impact on the future. If they have to go into battle, then these little things have an effect... everyone has to do their part."

A benefit of teamwork is the role it played in helping individuals develop a sense of social acceptance and integration into the organization. The newcomers were provided with a setting in which they could interact with others, and contribute to the overall direction of the team. Teamwork implied that individuals depended on each other, that communication was open and necessary, and that rivalry, prejudice, and resentment was not acceptable behavior.

The process involved in developing teamwork was to assure that all individuals were trained and understood their role. Expertise in the role meant that the individuals could do their jobs competently, but it also required an additional component. As part of a team, individuals made a commitment to share their knowledge with newcomers. This established a cycle of trained individual teaching and socializing newcomers into the organization. The information sharing included

knowledge about the task, and passing on the cultural knowledge necessary for successful military careers.

Teamwork is a valued commodity in the military. Learning to work as a team, and contributing toward the goal of defending the nation was a source of pride among the informants. It was especially notable among those individuals who felt that they were valued contributors to the organizations. Individuals who felt they were integrated into the team expressed the feeling of being valued, and that their role was important and appreciated. Individuals who were team members could look beyond their own personal goals, and could perceive that their performance and commitment to the organization contributed to the betterment of the military.

### Implications

These case studies appear to affirm the idea that individuals who have learned from mentors have internalized the information and have applied it to their personal lives and careers. Mentors are particularly influential in guiding and socializing newcomers into the organization. Newcomers have little cultural knowledge about the military, and breeches of etiquette, failure to comply with regulations, or misinterpretation of the mores and practices of the military could have serious consequences for an individual's career.

An individual can learn how to be <sup>a</sup><sub>^</sub> military person through a variety of methods. He or she may read the book of

regulations and attempt to absorb all the necessary information, or he or she may learn through social interaction. Individuals may seek information from more knowledgeable peers, and from their supervisors. This shared experience gives the uninitiated individual the opportunity to question and receive feedback about his or her performance and role in the organization.

The process of mentoring can be viewed as an essential feature of the educational and training experience for junior officers and enlisted men and women. Attaching oneself to a mentor can be beneficial to one's career, and is an avenue for becoming socialized into military culture. Mentors provide information that help younger individuals make decisions, consider various career paths, learn shortcuts, and improve their performance. Mentors also serve as models to younger individuals as person who have "made it" in their military career. The importance of a role model was a theme mentioned often in the study. This was particularly true of female and minority officers who cited instances of being inspired by high ranking women officers or such prominent minority figures as Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

A program that would link newcomers with more experienced staff would provide benefits for both the individual and the organization. The program would need to be designed to match mentors and proteges with similar interests and goals. Both mentors and proteges would need to undergo a process of

training whereby each would learn what is expected of them and what the potential outcomes would be. Merely assigning individuals to be mentored by a senior officer or noncommissioned officer would in all likelihood be ineffective. A training component would need to be developed to assure that the program contains the necessary elements for success: (1) The program should be structured so that mentors and proteges have enough time to interact and work jointly on a task or problem of interest to both, and with potential benefit to the military. (2) The mentor and protege should be compatible, and the collaboration should be voluntary. Assigning individuals to mentors has the potential for conflict and an unproductive collaboration. (3) There must be administrative commitment to the program. Resources and time must be allocated to allow individuals to meet and to produce a joint "product" that would benefit the organization. (4) Participants need to be recognized for their efforts. Successful mentors and their proteges should be rewarded for completing the program and contributing to the betterment of the organization.

In addition to the notion that mentoring will have positive effects on individuals, and will contribute to the growth and development of the military, mentoring has significant implications for women and minorities in the military. Women and minorities are often at a disadvantage when it comes to benefitting from a mentoring experience.

Because of this perceived lack of mentoring, women and minorities have less access to inside information or other clues that would benefit their careers and job performance. By linking women and minorities with mentors, they would have access to information and could apply it to their own careers.

Mentoring programs, although difficult to implement, have potential for becoming an integral part of the military training process. Mentoring appears to be an effective means for socializing newcomers, and providing hands-on experiences for individuals to practice leadership, improving their skills in the workplace, and introducing individuals to the team concept for improving the organization. Mentoring also appears to be an effective way for assuring that women and minorities will have equal access to information that is essential for their success in the military.

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