

INVITED APPLIED COMMENTARY

**MENTORING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: EXAMINING THE  
POTENTIAL FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION  
AND FOR ASPIRING NEW ENTREPRENEURS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Mentoring has been studied extensively and many positive benefits have been identified. Recently, more universities and governments have been attempting to use this powerful tool in an attempt to develop potential entrepreneurs. While a great deal of research has examined the key requirements for mentoring programs within established organizations, less is known about how the demands for effective mentoring change in the entrepreneurial context. This paper discusses effective mentoring in entrepreneurial education for both student led case competitions and networks for aspiring entrepreneurs.*

**Keywords:** Mentoring, Entrepreneurial Development, Entrepreneurial Education

**INTRODUCTION**

Mentoring has been studied extensively for more than 30 years in the management literature and many positive benefits have been identified. (see Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008 for a comprehensive review). Recently, more universities and governments have been attempting to use this powerful tool in an effort to develop potential entrepreneurs. While a great deal of research has examined the key requirements for mentoring programs within established organizations, less is known about how the demands for effective

mentoring change in the entrepreneurial context.

Kathy Kram (1985) conducted an extensive qualitative study in which she examined the developmental relationships of 18 pairs of junior and senior managers in a large public utility organization. Several of the key mentoring functions she identified in her seminal work on mentoring in the workplace are, understandably, more closely related to mentoring within a large hierarchical organization than to developmental relationships involving mentors and either new entrepreneurs or

student teams. St-Jean (2011) conducted a study of 360 protégés taking part in an entrepreneurial foundation's mentoring program, and identified a different set of mentoring functions for developmental relationships between experienced and novice entrepreneurs. This underscores the need for examining the mentoring phenomena within specific contexts.

While the functions and demands upon mentors in the entrepreneurial context may be different from those in a more hierarchical organization, there is growing empirical evidence that mentoring provides career benefits to entrepreneurial mentees. For example, Ozgen and Baron (2007) conducted a study with a sample of entrepreneurs who had recently founded new ventures in the information technology industry and their results indicated that mentors increase opportunity recognition by entrepreneurs. St-Jean and Tremblay (2011) expanded upon this research and found that the learning goal orientation of the mentee influenced the extent to which the opportunity recognition was increased. Ozgen and Baron (2007) went on to recommend that entrepreneurial educators should work to assist nascent entrepreneurs in obtaining mentors.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss effective mentoring in entrepreneurial education for both student led case competitions and networks for aspiring entrepreneurs. First, I briefly review the established research findings on mentoring. Then I discuss the unique demands of the new venture environment and the student led case competition team environment, and how mentoring may be adapted to fit those environments most effectively. Finally, I discuss the implications of this line of research for both academics and practitioners.

## MENTORING

Mentoring in the workplace has often been defined as an intense interpersonal exchange between a more senior member of the organization, the mentor, and a less experienced member, the protégé, whereby the mentor provides advice, counsel, feedback, and support in order to facilitate the career and personal development of the protégé (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985, Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, and Wilbanks (2011) reviewed the various definitions used in empirical studies on mentoring and noted that the definitions tend to have three core-attributes in common: reciprocity, developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interaction over some period of time. Reciprocity refers to a reciprocal relationship which involves mutual social exchange as opposed to a one-way relationship. Thus, a role model is not necessarily a mentor unless there is also regular personal interaction. Developmental benefits of a mentoring relationship refer primarily to the benefits regarding the protégé's work and career, but also include benefits to the mentor as well. Finally, regular consistent interaction over a period of time is necessary for a mentoring relationship. Thus, an individual would not be considered a mentor for giving someone generic advice once or twice.

Kram (1985) introduced the two broad categories of mentoring functions which are career-related and psychosocial. Career-related mentoring involves providing sponsorship, exposure and visibility, protection, coaching, and challenging work assignments. Psychosocial mentoring involves role-modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Scandura (1992) later demonstrated through factor analysis that role-modeling is a third

distinct function rather than a sub-function of psychosocial mentoring.

Sponsorship involves the mentor providing public support for the protégé. Exposure and visibility involves the mentor providing the protégé with the opportunity to interact with important members of the organization. Coaching is the aspect of mentoring that usually first comes to mind and involves the mentor sharing valuable knowledge and experience with the protégé. Protection occurs when the mentor intervenes in order to shield the protégé from potentially career harming situations. Challenging work assignments involve the mentor assigning the protégé challenging work that will facilitate growth and development of professional skills, and supporting the assignments with technical training and feedback.

Role-modeling involves the mentor setting a good example, and the protégé emulating it. Acceptance and confirmation involves the mentor providing support, encouragement, and a sense of safety to the protégé, which should empower the protégé to experiment with new behaviors without fear of rejection. Counseling does not directly involve work-related areas, but by allowing the protégé to discuss anxieties, fears, and conflicts, the mentor helps the protégé deal with personal concerns that might interfere with both personal and professional development. Friendship involves social interaction and enjoyable exchanges of information about both work-related and non-work-related activities. These functions may be provided by a single mentor, or from multiple mentors within a protégé's personal developmental network (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Higgins & Hunt, 2001).

Research in the mentoring literature has supported many positive outcomes for protégés in terms of both objective and subjective measures of career success (see Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004 for meta-analysis), but mentoring is beneficial for organizations as well. Wilson and Elman (1990) discussed the benefits of mentoring to organizations. The most obvious benefits for the organization are improvements in employee motivation, job performance, and retention rates. Another benefit of mentoring for the organization is the strengthening and perpetuation of the corporate culture. Mentors can also benefit the organization by passing information up, as well as down. In other words, mentors can act as "deep sensors" in order to detect "noise" at lower levels of the organization before it becomes a larger problem. The authors also emphasize the importance of the choice of mentors. They mention that some people are not psychologically secure enough to be mentors, and may see younger members of the organization as threats to their position. The authors note that as individuals rise through the organization, their need for mentoring does not decrease, especially when transitioning from one level of management to the next. Also, as protégés advance to higher levels, they will likely take on the role of mentor for newer employees. The authors close with a warning that mentors must keep up with the changing environment so as not to pass on obsolete or harmful practices to their protégés.

#### **MENTORING AND ENTREPRENEURIAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

The benefits of mentoring are well established for individuals within organizations and for the organizations themselves. While not as thoroughly

researched empirically, it makes perfect intuitive sense that having the benefit of a seasoned entrepreneur or businessperson who can share their hard-earned wisdom and experience with a student team or an aspiring entrepreneur would prove to be extremely valuable. Indeed, this has been recognized by entrepreneurial practitioners and educators for decades before the scholarly study of mentoring within large organizations became widespread.

From the standpoint of small business development and entrepreneurial assistance programs, it is a long standing tradition to provide mentoring to aspiring entrepreneurs. For example, SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives, information available at [www.score.org](http://www.score.org)) is a non-profit association and resource partner with the Small Business Administration which has been providing mentoring to small business owners since 1964. They currently have over 13,000 volunteers who offer their mentoring services to small business owners at no charge.

Many other organizations charged with the development of entrepreneurial activity have also implemented systems for linking novice entrepreneurs with experienced entrepreneur mentors. Some prominent examples include, Business Link in England, Mentor Eget Foretag in Sweden, the France Initiative in France, and the Foundation de l' Entrepreneurship in Quebec, Canada (St-Jean & Audet, 2011).

It is also considered good practice for entrepreneurial educators to provide access to mentors for student business plan competition teams (Russell, Atchison, & Roberts, 2008). In her popular press article for *BusinessWeek*, on the topic of strategies for winning business plan competitions,

Alison Damast (2007) noted that many judges and participants emphasized the importance of obtaining mentors in order to provide feedback and guidance for the student teams. Thus, it is important to examine how the functions of mentoring in the entrepreneurial education and development context differ from those of the large established hierarchical organization.

Sullivan (2000) summarized the research on entrepreneurial learning and mentoring that had taken place before the turn of the century and noted that learning is a necessity for successful entrepreneurship, and that mentoring is an effective teaching tool which allows entrepreneurs to take advantage of the experience of others. For example, Cox and Jennings (1995) found that the ability to learn from mistakes was critical for successful entrepreneurship, but that many entrepreneurs could not identify a single individual who met the classic definition of mentoring. Nevertheless, most of the successful entrepreneurs studied by Cox and Jennings (1995) did agree that learning from the experience of others, with particular emphasis on critical incidents, was very important and had been a key to their success. This supports the idea that the type of mentoring that is most successful in the entrepreneurial context differs from that of the large established organizational context.

As noted earlier, St-Jean (2011) conducted a series of empirical analyses to determine the unique demands of mentoring in the entrepreneurial context. Rather than applying the established mentoring functions developed by Kram (1985) in a large utility organization context, he began by conducting a qualitative analysis utilizing focus groups which included 51 novice entrepreneur mentees and 8

experienced entrepreneur mentors. This resulted in the categorization of several entrepreneurial mentor functions and the creation of several proposed items to measure the constructs. He then submitted the items and constructs to expert review by three business mentoring experts and finally tested the items in a sample of 360 mentees from the *Fondation de l'entrepreneuriat* and conducted confirmatory factor analyses to validate the scale. This resulted in St-Jean (2011) identifying four psychological functions, four career-related functions, and one role-modeling function.

The psychological mentor functions for entrepreneurs include reflector, reassurance, motivation, and confidant. The career-related mentor functions for entrepreneurs include integration, information support, confrontation, and guide. The role model function involves the mentee observing the mentor and listening to the mentor's stories about past experiences and learning to emulate the mentor's behaviors that have led to success.

The psychological mentor function for entrepreneurs of reflector involves the mentor giving the mentee feedback on the business plan and the image that the mentee projects to others, allowing the mentee to gauge progress and development. The reassurance function involves the mentor reassuring the mentee during difficult times and helping to alleviate stress by putting problems into perspective. The motivation function involves the mentor providing encouragement and building the mentee's self-confidence. Finally, the psychological mentor function for entrepreneurs of confidant develops over time as the mentee comes to trust and confide in the mentor as one would a friend.

The career-related mentor function for entrepreneurs of integration involves the mentor facilitating the integration of the mentee into the business community by introducing contacts. The information support function involves the mentor giving the mentee information which may include personal knowledge of business management, laws to be aware of, useful information on the industry, etc. The confrontation function involves the mentor questioning and challenging the mentee's ideas to help develop and strengthen them. Finally, the career-related mentor function for entrepreneurs of guide involves the mentor helping the mentee improve problem comprehension, and expand problem vision and context as well as making suggestions and giving advice towards a solution when necessary.

While similar in many respects to the widely accepted mentor functions which were developed in the large organizational context, the mentor functions for entrepreneurs have distinct differences. Most pronounced, would be the lack of the protection function. This is not surprising, because the primary reason why entrepreneurs prefer the term mentee to protégé when referring to the individual for whom they are providing developmental guidance, is because it does not imply protection (St-Jean, 2011). The entrepreneurial mentor helps their mentees to stand on their own, which is consistent with the classic entrepreneur persona of an independent and proactive individual. An effective entrepreneurial mentor allows the mentee to reach conclusions, with some guidance, as opposed to simply telling the answer. St-Jean and Audet (2011) found that a low directive, but high involvement mentoring intervention style produced the best results within the context of experienced entrepreneur mentors and

novice entrepreneur mentees. In other words, the best mentors spent a lot of time with their mentees and were readily available to them, but did not try to control them, or to make them a clone of themselves. They helped them to think about possibilities from different points of view and to consider the likely outcomes of different courses of action, while sharing their experiences and allowing the mentees to reach their own conclusions. This style would also likely be the best way to assist student-teams competing in business competitions.

One of the most popular and successful programs in higher education for developing entrepreneurial skill is the business plan competition. These competitions can provide stimulus for new venture creation, the development of new and innovative ideas, and an increase in the entrepreneurial skill and orientation within communities (Russell, et al, 2008). From the standpoint of higher education, business plan competitions provide an excellent vehicle for the development of a variety of entrepreneurial and general business skills for students.

Business plan competitions are an excellent way for institutions of higher learning to teach and encourage entrepreneurial mindsets and innovative behavior. In order for students to successfully complete a business plan, they must demonstrate discipline and a solid work ethic over a significant period of time, and during this process they will develop skills and knowledge specific to their product or service, as well as general business skills. The opportunity to put into practice what they have studied theoretically in their various finance, accounting, marketing, and management courses is an invaluable part of a top-quality business education.

In addition to developing the skills and refining the ideas necessary for the formation of new ventures, these competitions are an excellent opportunity for aspiring entrepreneurs to meet the contacts and mentors who can increase the likelihood of their new venture's success. Russell and colleagues (2008) noted that "...access to the business community through networking opportunities, mentors and judges all provide enormous benefits to participants and host institutions" (p. 124). The business plan competition provides an excellent opportunity to increase the exposure of the academic institution and to introduce students to their local business community in a favorable light. Many business leaders are very happy to be involved with the student competition teams and view it as their way of giving back to their community.

This provides an excellent opportunity for faculty facilitators of student business plan competition teams. As any experienced entrepreneurship educator knows, it is important to network in the local business community. Therefore, it should be relatively easy to find experienced business professionals who would be happy to share their knowledge and experience with the team as a mentor. This should prove very helpful for the students. Jodie O'Keefe (2008) recommends seeking feedback from trusted mentors when developing business plans for competitions. Russell and colleagues (2008) conducted a study of 51 participants in student business competitions and found that mentors and networking activities ranked second only to sponsorship and funding as factors for success.

## IMPLICATIONS

The benefits of mentoring for entrepreneurial education and development are evident from both an academic and practitioner standpoint. Mentoring is an excellent learning tool that incorporates the transfer of knowledge, skills, and ability through shared experience, as well as developing and strengthening self-confidence and entrepreneurial self efficacy in the mentee. Organizations which engage in entrepreneurial development within communities and entrepreneurial educators wishing to give their student business plan competition team the greatest learning experience should definitely work to provide access to experienced mentors.

In order to help maximize the benefits to the mentees, it would be helpful to provide volunteer mentors with information regarding the mentor functions for entrepreneurs. By making them aware of the psychological, career-related, and role-modeling functions that are utilized in high-quality entrepreneurial mentoring relationships, they can strive to make sure they are meeting the developmental needs of the mentees. Also, with regard to the manner in which mentors deal with mentees, Robert and Wilbanks (2012) noted that the appropriate use of humor can help to strengthen mentoring relationships and improve mentoring relationship quality. Additionally, making the mentors aware of the fact that the best mentoring results occur when utilizing a low directive and high involvement style will help them to encourage the mentees to develop their own problem solving skills and learn through the examples provided by listening to stories about the mentor's experience.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to discuss effective mentoring in entrepreneurial education for both student led case competitions and networks for aspiring entrepreneurs. The review of the research on the subject of mentoring revealed that there has been a great deal of scholarly attention directed at mentoring within large organizations. While the needs of the protégés in these traditional mentoring relationships have been well researched, very little attention has been paid to the unique demands of the mentoring of entrepreneurs until recently. Despite the fact that organizational researchers have not been studying entrepreneurial mentoring until recently, organizations charged with the task of developing the entrepreneurial activity within communities and regions have been employing this tool since the late 60s. This is excellent news, because the benefit of experience often proves invaluable to novice entrepreneurs and can have an impact on the economic development of communities and regions.

It is this author's hope that the information contained in this paper will be of benefit to entrepreneurial educators as they continue to incorporate the effective tool of mentoring into their entrepreneurial developmental networks and student business case competition teams. Also, that they will continue to recruit volunteer business mentors from their community and assist them by making them aware of the necessary mentoring functions for entrepreneurs and the benefits of engaging in a low directive, high involvement mentoring style.

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