

Mentoring and Organizational Learning

Michael J. Kelly, PhD and Michael L. Lauderdale, PhD

Introduction

State agency administrators are facing unparalleled change and environmental turbulence from changing federal-state relationships, government reinvention, and changing consumer expectations. The movement of some federal responsibilities to the states has been a recent feature of US policy (Kamerman, 1996). The National Performance Review (NPR), underway at the federal level, is designed to reinvent the federal government by helping agencies produce cheaper, higher quality customer responsive services through an empowered workforce. NPR deals in part with state-federal relationships that will inevitably affect state agencies (Gore, 1996), Cook, Reid & Edwards (1997), and Green & Edwards (1998) discuss the shifting relationship between state and federal governments, called the "devolution revolution," and conclude that most of the social movement is a response to growth in federal control, budget deficits, and out-of-control entitlement programs.

Many of these federal initiatives have been based upon successes that began at the state level in the 1980s (Lauderdale, 1999). Unable to finance debt through the Treasury as can the federal government, states have more than a decade's lead on the federal system in coping with increased demand for services in an era of revenue restriction. In many ways the challenge for states comes from their exposure to global competition that is forcing U.S. businesses to learn to produce quality goods and serve customers to ever-increasing levels of responsiveness (Connellan, 1997; Friedman, 1999; Gates, 1999). Business responsiveness, in turn, raises expectations for service quality in governmental and not-for-profit human service organi-

zations (Kelly & Lauderdale, 1999; Moore & Kelly, 1996). Citizens are beginning to ask if a mail order firm can provide services twenty-four hours per day, why cannot the governmental and non-profit sectors do the same.

With extensive pressure to adapt to changing circumstances, state agencies must depend upon the leadership of their management corps. Often, unfortunately, management is unable to provide the innovative energy. The authors' extensive experience in university-based research and project development for state agencies throughout the southwest and mid-west found that traditional management training did not produce managers ready to accept these new challenges. Most states do not have formal in-house management development programs and find outside programs prohibitively expensive. Available resources are largely absorbed by basic training for new workers or activities necessary to introduce new programs. With few exceptions, states are skeptical of degree programs and continuing education workshops. They are reluctant to send managers for master's degrees, fearing they will not learn useful skills or will return only to leave for better jobs. When state agencies and universities do work together, they often simply do not understand one another. Little has changed since Sebring's "The Five Million Dollar Misunderstanding" (1977) described deterioration of a state agency - university relationship.

Developing managers ready to take on the challenges of rapid, turbulent change within resource and time constraints clearly requires a novel approach. Agencies need a management development approach that fits existing organizational culture while producing leaders who can question

Michael J. Kelly is Professor, School of Social Work, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211. Michael L. Lauderdale is Clara Pope Willoughby Centennial Professor, School of Social Work, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712.

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existing methods and model the skills of a learning organization. The best models will have to be inexpensive, not interfere with immediate demands, be consistent with existing management development, and be conducted with minimal outside assistance.

This article describes an attempt to meet these demands. A university extension program, in cooperation with a state human service agency, was funded for a multi-year program that would develop a permanent, effective, inexpensive management advancement program and would introduce team problem solving and a learning orientation as aspects of the organization's culture.

Research and Demonstration Project

"Mentor +" was designed to pilot an approach to career and leadership development based in the creation and development of mentor-protégé relationships. The project was designed to identify managers who had the potential for leadership, the ability to develop other managers, and who could learn and introduce team-based problem solving methods. It was also planned to be inexpensive to scale up after the initial external funding ended.

"Mentor +" would create an interaction of three bases each of which could supply something unique to the management development process of the organization. The current managers, working in mentor-protégé dyads, would provide the continuing developmental relationships. The agency would provide a context of identifying immediate management concerns and the University would contribute its ability to catalyze individual and organizational learning. The "plus (+)" symbolizes the presence of a third, external, and catalytic party in the mentoring relationship. Thus, mentoring is enriched by the endorsement of the employing organization and the skills of the university. The project was funded for two years to allow time for the relationships to mature and to allow a development pace that would not interfere with the agency's immediate needs.

Conceptual Foundations: Mentoring and Organization Learning

The project was founded on two hypotheses: (1) that formal mentoring would be a new management development method that would help senior managers develop mid-level managers; and (2) that a university, as an entity specializing in learning and development, could serve as a catalyst for the development of organizational learning.

Mentoring

Management development involves addressing two needs, fostering individual abilities and knowledge and increasing understanding of immediate and long-term organizational needs. A formal mentoring program is a strategic approach to development that can address both of these needs.

Mentoring, a developmental relationship between individuals, occurs frequently in organizations and is seen as basic to a successful managerial career (Collins, 1994). Informal mentoring usually occurs without organization involvement or sanction and has been described in various kinds of organizational settings (Reich, 1986; Roche, 1979; Silverhart, 1994; Thorne, 1996). Hale (1995) notes that "the importance of mentoring lies in its potential to increase individual and organizational capacity, enhance career advancement and success for individuals, and help organizations reach development goals" (p 337). Individual benefits have been widely described in the literature. For protégés, these include higher salary, career advancement, and a higher level of career satisfaction (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Kram, 1983; Orpen, 1995). Fagenson (1988) suggested that mentorship may increase a protégé's power and influence within an organization. Similarly, organizational benefits have been found to include improved employee motivation, enhanced job performance, and higher retention rates (Wilson & Elman, 1990).

Many researchers believe that the benefits of informal mentorship can be "captured" by formal mentoring programs. They emphasize that formal

mentoring provides an exceptional opportunity for organizational development. Gray, (1986) for example, suggests that such programs can systematically meet career development needs – thus enabling the organization to address successfully its own need for management succession. Wilson and Elman, (1990) observe that mentorships provide a context for socialization that transfers organizational culture, and that individual benefits for protégés are apt to translate into organizational benefits as the result of stronger performance and increased loyalty.

Current business literature includes descriptions of formal programs at Apple Computer, Coca-Cola, and Fuller (Coley, 1996; Dockery & Sahl, 1998; and Veale & Wachtel, 1996). The formal elements of these programs include organizational sanction and matching (Coca-Cola); sanction, matching, a developmental plan, an applied project, and a special effort to include the protégé's direct supervisor (Apple); and all of these plus the involvement of outside consultants and senior management in the "team project" at Fuller. Regardless of their degree of complexity, the outcomes described for the programs include increased organizational commitment and enhanced job satisfaction and performance.

Double-Loop Learning and The Learning Organization

The University's catalytic role was to mesh individual learning and organizational learning. Many organizational theorists stress the need for organizations to use all their human resources to understand service delivery problems and to innovate in providing solutions. Argyris (1993), Kouzes and Posner (1996, 1997), and Morgan (1997), among others, stress that organizations must learn. Adopting a culture of learning and innovation requires leadership that can empower, assist, and support all members of the organization (Senge, 1990). A learning organization has the need for both "single loop" and "double loop learning." Single loop learning is concerned with learning to

act so that problems are solved more efficiently, while double loop learning involves critical reflection upon and improvement in the problem-solving methodology itself (Argyris, 1993). As an objective, external participant, the University expected to help the agency question assumptions, norms and "ways of doing things" that can inhibit finding true solutions for problems.

Over time, businesses have developed many tools and concepts that permit some quantification of managerial effectiveness. Market share, the rate of return on investment, and profits and dividends are familiar standards that provide some measure of the effectiveness of management. Similar concepts are less developed in the not-for-profit and governmental sector (Mintzberg, 1996; Yudof & Busch-Vishniac, 1997). The controlling authorities for such organizations are also less straightforward. Civil service rules, pay and promotion policies often do not permit management to reward desired behavior. Legislators in addition to the governor may exercise considerable influence on state organizations and with many programs, federal rules may be greater determinants of state managerial discretion than state rules. As Wilson (1989) points out, effective problem solving can often be more difficult for state bureaucracies than for other organizations due the external constraints on managerial actions.

The project's task, particularly the University's task, was to attempt to move the organization toward a learning orientation. At the time the project was implemented, the concept of organizational learning was not as popular as it is today. Founded principally on Schon's (1975) ideas on learning to learn and Argyris's (1982) ideas on double-loop learning, the project was intended to introduce some of the traits associated with learning organizations. The differences between the learning organization and the traditional state bureaucracy can be seen by comparing the essential traits of each (Table 1).

Table 1: Key Traits of Learning and Bureaucratic Organizations

Learning organization traits	Bureaucracy traits
1. Information transfer across the organization	Information transfer from the top down
2. Individual learning valued	Limited individual learning
3. Learning and creativity rewarded	Deviation from rules punished
4. Freedom to risk, innovate, explore	Emphasis on following the rules
5. Benchmarked performance goals	Control oriented goals
6. Team oriented	Solo expert oriented
7. Cooperative projects between agencies	Protecting turf
8. Power from shared information	Power from hoarding information
9. Networked teams	Hierarchical management control
10. Decisions made at the customer interface	Decisions pushed up the ladder
11. Technology accepting	Technology resistant
12. Continuous improvement	Good enough and business as usual
13. Emphasis on learning and coaching	Close oversight and mistake finding

Project Description: Formal Mentoring and Learning Activities

Participants

Twenty mentors and twenty protégés were selected by a joint university–agency steering committee, but one manager left the agency early in the project leaving thirty-nine participants (N=39). The agency operates statewide with over 100 local offices in various communities, several regional offices and a centralized state office. The management positions represented in the project included 19 local managers, 6 regional managers, and 14 senior management positions at the central office level. Both regional and central office positions included individuals who reported directly to the organization’s chief administrative officer. Senior managers were designated as “mentors” while local and most regional level middle managers were designated as “protégés.” Descriptive data for the two groups of managers are presented in Table 2.

Dyad Matching and Management

Participants were matched based on a combination of agency preference and the information obtained during one and one-half hour interviews.

The interviews, conducted by a team of two researchers, assessed personal and professional style, individual management careers, information seeking behavior, and outside interests. Participants were then matched based on similarity of styles and interests. Other considerations in the matching process included geographic distance between pairs, organizational distance between titles, and similarity of career development paths. No mentor-protégés matches involved mentors who were direct supervisors and usually the dyads were separated by at least two organizational levels. Protégés who were hesitant about participating in the project were given mentors with supportive, non-authoritative styles.

The project included a component of very active management of the individual dyads. Dyads were monitored on an individual basis for satisfactory relationship development. The individual dyads met for the first time at a structured group meeting. During the two weeks following their introductions, project staff contacted each protégé by telephone to assess progress. If no interactions had occurred since the meeting, project staff contacted the men-

Table 2

Variable	Mentors	Protégés
Average Age	43.8	39.6
Male	12	11
Female	8	8
Professionally related advanced degree	9	8
Average tenure in current position (years)	4.4	3.5
Centralized state office managers	14	0
Regional managers	1	4
Local managers	5	14
Average total years of experience (years)	19	13.6
Average number of positions held	5.7	4.2

tor by telephone and requested that the mentor initiate communication with the protégé. If the protégé indicated any level of hesitation or apprehension regarding communication with the mentor, project staff contacted the mentor, reported the problem, and discussed strategies for better interactions. After the initial contacts, project staff, in order to check for potential problems, contacted any mentor or protégé who did not attend a group meeting and had not informed his or her partner in advance.

Learning by Project Design

The project plan was for one-day development meetings, called mentoring conferences, held approximately every other month. These group meetings were structured to move from individual development to dyad development to small group and finally large group problem solving. A major topic at each conference introduced "double loop" learning and team methods. The conferences also included workshops on Agency and Environment, Organizational Culture, and on Formal Mentoring Programs. Typical conference topics were Political Culture of the State, Program Evaluation Methods, Team Problem Solving, etc.

The participants had completed a battery of management assessment instruments after being

selected. The conferences featured presentations based on the instruments. The dyads, working together, were led through scoring and discussion of their personal results. Following the presentations, dyads met together to discuss the conference topics, share feedback on instrument results and work on their assigned projects

Mentor-protégé dyad activities

In addition to the individual managerial development that occurred, each mentor-protégé team, as part of the project, took responsibility for structuring their relationship around a specific problem-solving activity. The dyad projects were a major focus for mentor-protégé activity and required the bulk of their time and energy. From the protégés' perspectives, these activities were either "challenging assignments" that addressed specific organizational issues, or "specialized training/coaching" in which mentor helped protégé solve job-related problems. The range of projects is shown in table 3.

Evaluation of the project

A concluding meeting which involved all participants, an observer from another state agency, and federal project officials, was held to review and critique the project. Later, all mentors and protégés were interviewed to determine their reactions. About one year later all participants were contacted

Table 3: Mentor-Protégé Assignments

Challenging Assignments	Specialized Coaching
Analyze policy, recommend policy change (status offenders)	How to manage "difficult personnel problems"
Analyze policy, recommend specialized staff training (court mandated home studies)	How to plan and carry out middle-management reassignment
Develop forms and procedures to track regional expenditures of allocated funds	How to manage an office (for a new local office director)
Analyze policy, recommend policy change (psychiatric placement)	How to use the PC to track case statistics as a measure of performance
Analyze procedure; recommend protocols (liaison with urban police department)	How to strengthen your management style
Analyze procedure; recommend decision-making criteria (hiring and selection)	How to manage an office (planning electronic data terminal locations)
Analyze policy; recommend program changes (drug-exposed infants)	How to develop policy
Analyze problem; recommend solutions (morale issues)	How to locate and obtain new facilities for local offices
Analyze procedure; develop tracking mechanism (required staff training)	
Analyze procedure; develop protocol (internal communication)	
Analyze problem, recommend protocols (relationships with providers)	

and interviewed about the project, and finally, seven years after the project, agency records were reviewed to determine the status of the participants and a non-participating comparison group.

Results

Immediate and Long-term Benefits

Costs: The project produced approximately 20 days of training per individual including both group development conferences and individual mentor-protégé interaction. The 40-person group logged approximately 6080 person-hours of developmental interaction. The total direct costs of the project were approximately \$90,000, which means that each development hour cost approximately \$15.00. When the cost of a two-way live satellite education

experiment that was part of the overall project is subtracted, an agency and university could reproduce the results obtained here at approximately \$10.00 per hour.

Individual Benefits: Of the 20 protégés in the project, 11 had been promoted to increased job responsibilities within 6 months of the end of the project. The following year, there were 3 additional promotions. Thus, within 18 months 70% of the participants had been promoted. Several other protégés were under consideration for advancement or for key administrative assignments.

By contrast, only 22% of all other agency managers holding the same job titles (n=358) had been promoted during the same period. It could be asserted that simply being selected for the Mentor+

project rather than the activities in the project caused the higher rate of promotion. However, other data such as retention lend support to project participation as having created significant change among the participants. Seven years later, 95% of the participating protégés were still with the agency. By comparison, the group of non-participating middle managers with the same job titles experienced 33% attrition during the same period of time. While mentoring often produces individual growth, the benefits of this program were primarily to the careers of the middle managers. The promotion rate of protégés and the greater exposure given to participants was a major benefit. It should be noted that a team of top agency people helped select the participants and that that may also explain the promotion rates of participants. Those chosen for the project may have already been on a fast track for advancement in the organization. The control group, of course, did not have the sanction or organizational visibility that the protégé group did. Certainly, the "demand" characteristic of being chosen by the organization to be a protégé is a likely important factor in itself for the higher promotion rate. This does not, however, invalidate the apparent effects of formal mentorship, but rather illustrates the various organizational impacts of such a strategy.

During end of project evaluation interviews all participants reported personal and managerial growth experiences and many indicated that it was the most effective and personally satisfying development experience of their agency careers. All participants indicated that they would be pleased to participate in further mentoring projects and that they were going to continue mentoring others on their own. All mentors reported satisfaction in having the opportunity to teach another manager some essential skills and they reported heightened morale from having been recognized by the agency for their ability to develop other managers.

All participants reported that they had experienced an increase in the opportunities to participate

in key activities within the agency. This led to many being able to contribute on select committees, external advisory groups and before the legislature and thus enabled them to gain recognition by state agency managers, elected officials, and important external "stake holders."

Organizational Benefits: The agency benefited from the development of managers and the identification and development of middle level managers who could be promoted. Retention of managers also increased. An estimate of the cost of training managers suggests that retention of skilled managers saves the state hundreds of thousands of dollars for each manager retained. The agency also benefited from the projects the dyads undertook. The mentor-protégé projects resulted in a number of agency improvements that might not have occurred without the stimulus and support of this project. For example, a newly appointed program director used the mentor-protégé interaction to solve a problem in staff organization which as lead to improved services, higher morale, and better planning.

The university benefited from the project in that it established a new kind of relationship with the state agency. Unlike management training programs in which university faculty and staff attempt to teach managerial ideas and skills for implementation in the agency, this program built upon existing managerial skills and extended them in a supportive manner. Further, the faculty and staff added information and skills in a consultative mode: managers were not required to become students but maintained their status as professionals.

The new relationship was strengthened by the fact that both organizations had highly visible project roles that matched their internal competencies. Thus, for the university the selection and matching of a protégé and mentor was a task often done in making internship assignments. The development plans for individual protégés were based on a learning needs assessment, again a common educational task. Lastly, the university's role of providing educational support for experienced mentors and pro-

tégés was a familiar one. Similarly, university people were able to see the dedication of agency staff working on difficult problems based in practice "reality"; and agency managers selected as "problems for work" key areas in which solutions would make a real difference in agency effectiveness.

Discussion

As noted, the project was based on two hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that mentoring would be a new management development method. Surprisingly, the initial interviews indicated a very high level of informal mentoring. Ninety-two percent (92%) of the managers reported having had a mentor suggesting that mentoring was a frequent, even if informal, method of management development. In fact, mentorship may be common within organizations that emphasize human service. Campion and Goldfinch (1983) reported that 72% of their sample of hospital administrators "had a mentor at some point in their career." Vance (1982) found that 83% of a group of "influential nurses" reported having one or more mentors. A further surprise was the extent to which direct supervisors were reported to be mentors. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the reported mentoring relationships involved a direct supervisor as mentor. These data suggest that informal mentoring by the direct supervisor has substituted for formal management development.

Although mentoring was not new to the agency, the introduction of a formal mentoring program supported by the university was new. There can be a substantial "downside" to informal relationships. For example, Scandura (1998) suggests that mentors may be unable to really explain the actual nature of their work. They may be too protective or controlling, denying their protégé full participation and a true opportunity to progress. Hennefrund (1986) cites a study in which 40% of mentor bosses fired their protégés. He notes other possible drawbacks to the relationship for the protégé including intense scrutiny, excessive workload, and problems

with independence. Problems with cross gender relationships are documented by Hale (1995) and by Ragins and Cotton (1996) including the fact that such relationships may be perceived to be personal and not professional. Further, since informal mentoring relationships transmit and reinforce existing organizational culture, barriers to organizational learning that may exist within that culture are not challenged by those relationships.

The supported mentoring method may offer a number of advantages when compared to informal mentoring. The Mentor + approach provides a structure through which relationship issues can be addressed. The project's initial training and orientation addressed both power and gender issues in mentoring relationships. University staff were also able to monitor relationships by separately interviewing both mentors and protégés during the course of the project. In addition, the use of formal mentors that were not direct supervisors and the introduction of new problem-solving technologies were both mechanisms that challenged existing organizational culture. Given these positive variations on the informal mentoring theme, we believe that project results should encourage human service organizations to formalize existing mentoring activities.

The second hypotheses was that the university, with its expertise in individual development, could act as a catalyst to move the organization toward developing a learning-oriented, information sensitive culture. While project results did indicate that the agency was able to improve its "single loop" learning, and thereby to develop effective solutions for several long-term problems, it did not appear to the authors that the self-scrutiny inherent in "double loop learning" had taken root by the end of the project. Our subsequent experience with the organization suggests that Hale's (1995) observation that "a mentoring organization does not necessarily lead to organization learning, nor does a mentoring organization necessarily become a learning organization" is true (p. 334). Further research is needed

to determine the barriers that a large bureaucracy must overcome in order to initiate true organizational learning, and to investigate whether extensive informal mentoring within human service organizations is one of those barriers.

Conclusion

Development of skilled managers is a persistent agency problem. Managerial turnover because of retirement, resignations and/or relocation require an active developmental focus. The direct costs and time demands of training, however, cause many agencies to ignore the problem. Further, current changes in the expectations placed on state agencies will require managers who can provide leadership and introduce appropriate organizational change.

Supported formal mentoring provides a cost-effective method of management development that:

- (1) is at once organizational and individual in focus;
- (2) starts at any level that the protégés may be;
- (3) proceeds at a pace consistent with an agency's more immediate demands;
- (4) is long-term in nature;
- (5) taps the invaluable resources of senior managers; and
- (6) focuses on organizational problems within the mentor-protégé team's area of expertise.

From this study, it is still unclear whether a formal, supported mentoring program can act as a catalyst for the transformation of a human services agency bureaucracy into a true "learning organization." However, the Mentor + approach did focus outside resources to help an organization begin to learn how to learn, and introduced scientific and team-based problem-solving.

Increasingly, organizations are using leadership models rather than traditional top down management schemes to build adaptive, learning organizational cultures. Organizations benefit when mentoring relationships tap the skills of organization members and work through their individual prefer-

ences and talents. Some mentors will see the relationship as a teaching and will tutor their protégés. Similarly, others who prefer a coaching relationship will coach and some will simply offer friendship. Regardless, the protégé will gain a new perspective on the organization through the lens of the relationship. In addition, mentoring relationships help build group continuity by engaging the relatively naive and the experienced in a mutually beneficial process.

Supported formal mentoring programs may be especially appropriate for public human services. Some research (Campion & Goldfinch, 1983; Vance, 1982, Kelly & Post, 1995) suggests that informal mentoring is common in human service organizations. Mentoring can be a vehicle for organizational change. In addition, human services personnel have the professional background necessary to help them deal openly and positively with relationships. These factors, and the likely benefits to participants and organizations, make supported formal mentoring an attractive management development strategy for public human services agencies.

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